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There are many unknowns when it comes to hunting, but the drive to bag a deer remains constant – and it's not always for the reason you might think. by Marvin Newman

*ON THE COVER*—A Midwest whitetail is all polished up and ready for autumn.

Photo: Dustin Reid

*Page 5*—A 10-point buck stands alert in thick brush as he attempts to peel the crimson velvet from his rack. Photo: Dustin Reid

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DANIEL E. SCHMIDT

## UNRAVEL THE MYSTERIES OF DEER TRAILS

Improvements to scouting cameras have taken deer hunting to new levels over the past 20 years and provided hunters with in-depth insights into deer behavior. In fact, many high-profile hunters use high-tech camera systems to unravel the secrets behind trail-use trends.

Mature bucks are complex creatures, and no two are the same. However, big bucks show some similarities when using well-worn game trails. First, older bucks tend to stay on main trails less than doe groups and young bucks. They often skirt major runways, cut corners and use parallel routes. It's certainly possible they're merely more cautious and less prone to "trust" the instincts of other deer.

On the other hand, older bucks might just be more adaptable because they probably have encountered more pressure in hunted environments.

A good example of how bucks use trails and cover was shown many years ago during a scientific study by a team of Illinois biologists led by Charles Nixon. According to the researchers, heavily pressured mature bucks often use obscure trails to enter thick cover, and they will remain in cover for days without moving.

The most extreme case featured one mature buck that sought refuge in a cornfield and stayed there for nearly an entire month. A deer like that would be nearly impossible to hunt, but this example shows how important it is to control human scent and hunter presence on smaller properties when your goal is to hunt older bucks.

Even on sparsely pressured



land, mature bucks have a comfort zone that only they know. Another key to targeting these deer involves knowing how to pinpoint subtle changes in the landscape and predict how bucks use them in their daily travels.

That's why it's usually best to closely scout an area that has heavy deer trails. If you span out, you'll find that the best buck activity is typically off of the secondary and tertiary trails the splinter off from those well-worn paths.

That's the key to this lesson. Don't be fooled into thinking well-worn trails will always result in many deer sightings. The opposite is often true, especially in big-woods environments, because such trails are typically nighttime routes. Trails are merely highways from bedding to feeding areas.

There's nothing wrong with getting excited about finding one of these thoroughfares, but it's important to view a gem of a trail as the beginning piece to a puzzle containing many pieces. Then, ask yourself lots of questions.

And get ready to put in some serious time in the woods (scouting and hunting) to unravel deer movement patterns in your area.

DAN.SCHMIDT@MEDIA360LLC.COM

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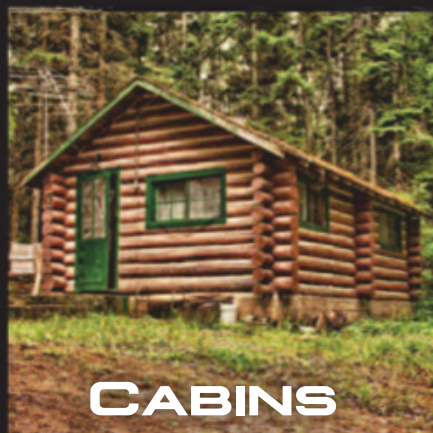
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## READERS RECOIL



**I FELT COMPELLED** to write this note after reading Larry Polenske's article "Bless This Hunt" in the June issue of Deer & Deer Hunting.

This story has so many similarities to my hunting history. In the 1970s, our group of hunters would go to Michale's Special School to meet with the principal, Sister Lillian, and have a potluck supper. We usually would make a donation toward a scholarship, and Sister Lillian would bless all the hunters for a safe and successful season. This tradition went on for years.

Time has taken its toll on our group, as I am the only hunter remaining. I started deer hunting when I was 12. I'm now 73.

Mr. Polenske's article was well written. Because of quality content like this, I have retrieved the renewal card from the trash bin and will be renewing my Deer & Deer Hunting subscription for another year.

— Tony Serio, Alabama

**I SUBSCRIBE TO** about six hunting and fishing magazines, and this is the first time I've ever written to any of them. I wanted to voice my opinion on the June issue's "Readers Recoil"

section and also Steve Bartylla's "Let's Get Real" article.

First, on the topic of baiting (and trail cameras) that many readers sounded off on in the letters section. I'm 66 years old, and I've been a deer hunter since I was 18. We have hunted public land for over 40 years and have harvested many deer (over 100 for me). You can call me old school, but I like sitting on a deer stand every season and not knowing what may or may not happen. Putting out bait to attract deer or bear might be OK for others, but not me. To me, it's more like killing than it is hunting.

As for Steve's article "Let's Get Real," he said it best when he said it's a lot easier to shoot a big deer when you're hunting meticulously managed private ground (as opposed to public land). To me, shooting any buck on public land is just as rewarding as shooting a big buck on strictly managed private land.

If I had to choose only one magazine to subscribe to, it definitely would be Deer & Deer Hunting. Keep up the good work!

— Gary Lynch, Virginia

**WHAT A GREAT** and interesting editorial ("A Weighty Issue") that Daniel Schmidt wrote in the Summer issue of D&DH! I'm a born-and-raised Northern New Englander — first in Vermont, now in New Hampshire. I've been a deer hunter since 1955, and many of us hunters here care more about a deer's field-dressed weight than we do about number of antler points. Yes, it's fun to dream about a heavyweight 10- or 12-pointer, but most of us don't waste a lot of time on that.

Anyway, I have some contenders for your "fifth place" buck. Every February, The Maine Sportsman monthly magazine lists the Top 10 bucks from the previous fall deer seasons. I deliberately cut out and saved the issue dated February 2001 because of the amazing No. 1 and No. 2 bucks from the the 2000 hunting season.

The second-place buck that year came in at a whopping 297 pounds field-dressed. The top buck? That one field-dressed a mighty 310 pounds!

— Phil Brown, New Hampshire

**THIS MESSAGE IS** for Madi Mantei ("A 12-Year-Old with a Passion for Deer Hunting" on Page 13 of the April issue of D&DH).

With your mindset, determination and good grades (by taking your homework to the deer stand), you could be a surgeon or surgical assistant. The downside of becoming a surgeon (schooling, busy lifestyle, etc.) is it does not leave much time for hunting.

I am not a surgeon, but I managed to get into a practice where I have enough time off for hunting.

— K-Lynn Paul, M.D., Arizona



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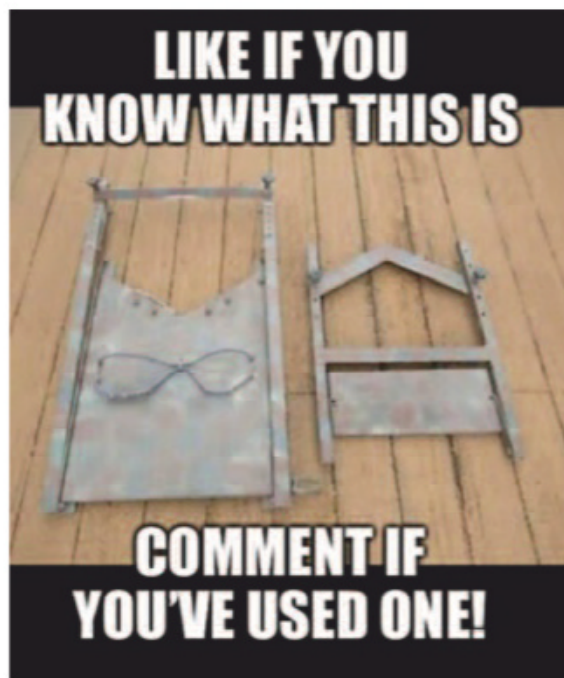
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REACTIONS: 1,069  
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**BO ELLIS:** I've taken more than one ride on one of those!!

**CHRIS BRADLEY:** 30 ft. up in a poplar tree and the feet straps come off and there goes the stand. ALL THE WAY TO THE BOTTOM. There I was hanging again 30 ft. up.

**CHRIS MORRISON:** It's amazing more people didn't die back in the day haha. Shady at best climbing stand and no safety harnesses.

**ROUNDER KNABLE:** I fell 15 ft. broke leg and ankle layed up two and a half months. Lucky!

**TODD WINFIELD:** Back in the day, we built them out of conduit with bolt welded to it for tree grippers.

**MICHAEL J FURNIA:** Killed my first big buck using one of these when I was 16.

**STEPHEN BISS:** Yea I wound up with a broken nose and bit a hole through my tongue when mine let loose .I don't have good memories of Baker portables.

**JOHN SCHMITT:** Had to shimmy down many a tree after climber slipped off feet. Very scary.

**JIM RUCKER:** I think that's a Baker stand, I had a Buck Buster, both aluminum angle and plywood.

**EDWARD MALEADY:** Had the Mighty Mite, Slim Jim and Pro model. That's all we had. Shot deer out of all them . Slid down a wet poplar once and saw my life flash in front of me!

**TYSON SPRANDEL:** Looks like a Baker Climbing Tree Stand. Had one and used it often many years ago. Had a few slips with it. Used it one year in rifle season, and when I shot a buck, I almost fell out of the tree. Many people fell and were seriously injured and even killed. Needless to say Baker went out of business!



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*Alfonso Zepeda used a longbow and cedar arrows to take down this awesome buck last season. Congrats, sir!*







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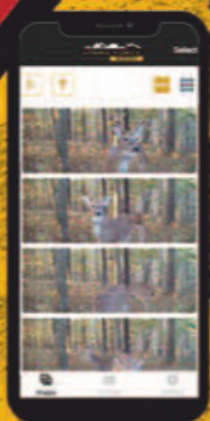


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*A buck can be its own worst enemy as it competes for breeding privileges, particularly when nutritionally dependent on abused habitat due to excessive numbers.*



# DEATH STALKS THE WHITETAIL

**DISEASES IN DEER CAN SPREAD LIKE WILDFIRE, BUT CERTAIN ACTIONS CAN BE TAKEN TO PROTECT THEM – AND US.**

**A**s the helicopter banked to begin another transect on the Maverick County ranch I was surveying for deer, I intensively scanned the various openings in the brush for those older, reticent bucks that often remain ensconced in the dense thornscrub, refusing to run from the craft. Thirty feet above the virtually flat, wide open South Texas terrain relinquishes a false sense of visibility, but the brush is always thicker than it appears, which is why I have two additional observers accompany me. Six eyes are better than two, and as we flew over a dense stand of persimmon trees, we spotted a doe lying on its side, thrashing its feet in a futile attempt to run. Once a safe place to land was located, I exited the helicopter to determine the reason why the deer was immobilized.





*Harvest data is imperative when making harvest recommendations necessary to maintaining habitat vitality, and in turn herd health.*

Initially, I assumed it may have hit a tree in its attempt to escape the aircraft, which I have occasionally observed in the past, but that was not the case.

Once on the ground, I negotiated my way through the maze of brush and prickly pear as the pilot, positioned above the animal, guided me to it. Upon reaching the animal, it was no longer flailing its legs. It was dead, and like many others throughout the summer and early fall of 2019, it succumbed to anthrax, which prevailed throughout several Southwest Texas counties.

Anthrax occurs throughout the world, but there is a portion of Southwest Texas where it is concentrated. The bacteria *Bacillus*

*anthracis* produces spores that lie dormant in the soil until conditions are favorable. The spores move to the surface during wet springs, and when proceeded by dry, hot periods common in Southwest Texas, they concentrate at the soil surface and on vegetation, where they are either inhaled or consumed by deer.

Symptoms are similar to Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease (EHD), another deer killer, such as difficulty breathing, seizures, and signs of blood oozing from the various orifices. Some, like the doe we discovered, fail to exhibit any signs, but simply drop to the ground, immobilized for a short period before succumbing.

Anthrax is common throughout

a seven-county region of Southwest Texas referred to as the ‘Anthrax Triangle.’ Ranchers within the triangle, inured to the fact that it is an ubiquitous part of their lifestyles, vaccinate domestic stock on an annual basis, but that’s not possible for wild, free-ranging deer, which die by the hundreds during severe outbreaks like the one experienced in Texas this past summer. Anthrax is also zoonotic, transferable to humans, and if left untreated, can be fatal.

The first cases of the disease in June of 2019 occurred in Uvalde County on one of the ranches I consult for, and by mid-August, the Texas Animal Health Commission had confirmation of anthrax on 18 properties in five counties. The outbreak was massive and the geographic extent was large. So extensive was the outbreak that local veterinarians called it the worst case of the disease in their careers.

In early August, I had the opportunity to visit with epidemiologist Dr. Jason Blackburn from the University of Florida while he investigated the disease on a Uvalde County ranch hit hard by it. Blackburn is recognized as the first scientist to develop a predictive model of where *Bacillus anthracis*, the causative agent of anthrax, is most likely to occur in the U.S. based on environmental factors and the presence of wildlife and domestic stock. According to Blackburn, “Its distribution in the Western states does to some extent match the rangeland habitats, the short and long grass prairies. It tends to establish itself in high alkaline soils. In Eastern states, it tends to occur in soils with a lower pH — acidic soils that create a crude line in the sand beyond which the organism just doesn’t survive.”

While in Texas, Blackburn was more importantly investigating the role biting and necrophagic flies that feed on carrion play as potential vectors, moving the disease around after coming in contact with animals that perish from anthrax.

From mid-April through October 2019, whitetails, along with a substantial number of exotic ungulates, perished from the disease. One unique trait of anthrax is that it often concentrates on certain areas within the triangle, with some ranchers witnessing little to no mortality, while





*Labeled 'Killer X' in the 1950s, Epizootic Hemorrhagic Disease led sportsmen to believe that they had realized their last days of hunting deer, but both the disease and deer exist today.*



*Concentrating deer during disease outbreaks should be avoided to mitigate its spread.*

others lose substantial numbers of animals. In some instances, anthrax is even concentrated on certain portions of a landholding.

The disease is so common in the anthrax triangle that landowners often exude an apathetic attitude toward its occurrence, as there's really nothing they can do to aid free-ranging animals. Thus, many cases go unreported in order to avoid the mandatory quarantine period. But deer hunters within the region must exercise caution when sick or dead deer are observed because they could contract the deadly disease by handling affected animals.

The correct protocol when a

wild animal is found dead during an anthrax outbreak is to burn the carcass until only ashes remain. Otherwise, the bacteria will remain in the internal portions of the cadaver. It's also prudent to wear long pants and long-sleeved shirts to avoid getting bitten by the flies generally attracted to dead animals.

Humans can get infected by inhaling spores into their lungs, having a flesh wound come in contact with an infected animal, or by consuming undercooked meat of an infected animal.

The fact that anthrax can be deadly to both man and animal forces sportsmen to be aware of where the

disease commonly occurs and keep abreast of the most recent outbreaks.

Fortunately, anthrax generally dissipates once cold temperatures arrive, thus the threat of anthrax during the winter hunting season is minimal.

Anthrax, however, is not the only disease that affects white-tailed deer. The latest disease demanding attention is the fatal neurological disease referred to as Chronic Wasting Disease (CWD), and even though there is no evidence that this disease, found in white-tailed deer, mule deer, elk, moose and other members of the deer family, can affect humans, it remains prudent that hunters always take necessary precautions when handling wild animals, particularly when they exhibit signs of illness.

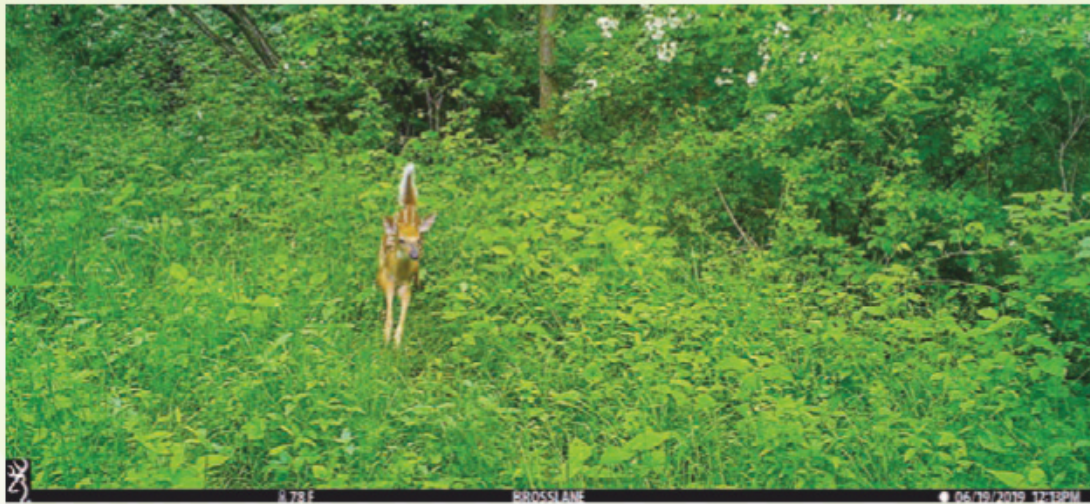
CWD has become more political than biological, and when one considers the propaganda-like press it receives, one would have to wonder why they would ever hunt again, particularly since it's often falsely reported to be a health hazard.

While the controversy over the disease and its potential impact on humans consuming venison will continue, the disease is fatal to white-tailed deer. Once it appears, it is at present impossible to eradicate; thus state agencies establish guidelines for affected areas to prevent its spread.

The first case of CWD in Texas occurred in 2012 in free-ranging mule deer in far West Texas and has been detected in free-ranging mule deer, white-tailed deer, and elk in Dallam and Hartley counties in the northwest portion of the Panhandle. The first case of the disease in Texas was a white-tailed deer in a Medina County deer breeding facility in 2015. Increased testing requirements resulted in the discovery of CWD in four additional breeding facilities and two release sites adjacent to the initial detection site. It was also found in a free-ranging white-tailed deer in Medina County in 2017.

Containment of the disease remains a priority, and the present measures are an attempt to contain the disease, because once established, it appears to be invincible. As of April 2020, 176 CWD-positive cases involving white-tailed deer, red deer and mule deer have been recorded in Texas, with 129 associated with deer





## VIEW TO A KILL

While we all know that coyotes kill a good percentage of fawns, seeing it done is quite rare. My good friend and business acquaintance Larry Hayes who is part owner of Bob's Gun & Tackle in Hastings, Michigan, forgot to pull one of his Browning trail cameras after deer season and was quite surprised when he pulled it the following June to see that the batteries were still working.

Larry's property is in an area with a good mix of agriculture and timber and where there are quite a few deer and a lot of coyotes and he's very aware that coyotes take their fair share of deer. But he was still quite surprised when he viewed the camera's pictures, especially a three-photo series.

The first was of a fawn playfully prancing out into the small opening with its tail at full alert mode at 12:13 p.m.

The second was taken 26 minutes later at 12:39 p.m. and was of a coyote that had just stepped out of the woods in the exact same location as the fawn had and by the way he was standing he looked to be focused on something.

The third was taken 1 hour and 28 minutes later at 2:07 p.m. and it was of the coyote with the fawn in its mouth.

Did the coyote spook the fawn and slowly and methodically pursue and kill it? More than likely, but with a total time gap of nearly two hours between the fawn entering the opening and the coyote going back in with the fawn in its mouth, that's anybody's guess. Whatever the sequence, there is no doubt that coyotes take a huge toll on fawns, and this series of pictures verifies it.

— John Eberhart

breeding facilities and release sites.

Impervious to eradication procedures, it remains important to slow down if not stop the spread of this fatal disease, which remains the responsibility of not only deer breeders, but more importantly hunters. Processing of deer harvested within CWD management zones should follow state-issued guidelines prior to transportation within and outside the state.

The fact is, deer succumb to a variety of diseases. It's referred to as compensatory mortality, that is if one disease is eliminated, another mortality factor will take its place. In most cases, the impact is greater in deer herds allowed to expand unchecked. When deer numbers exceed the carrying capacity of the land, the demand placed on the vegetation becomes excessive, depriving animals of a healthy diet. Overpopulated deer herds exhibiting below average body weights, fewer fawns and overall poor health are more susceptible to disease.

The one thing we have learned from the COVID-19 pandemic is that its spread can be mitigated by reducing group contact or concentrations of people. This same philosophy can be applied to control the various diseases that impact deer by curtailing feeding practices that attract a large number of animals to a particular site like the winter elk feeding program outside Jackson Hole, Wyoming. Supplemental feeding of deer represents the same hazard unless feeders are dispersed throughout a property to reduce what I refer to as forced concentrations.

Disease remains a threat to deer, and in some cases, man. Some, like anthrax and epizootic hemorrhagic disease, have been around for a long time. Others like CWD are relatively new and must be continually monitored and controlled in order to ensure youngsters today the opportunity to enjoy whitetails in the future.

— Bob Zaiglin is a university professor and a private-land wildlife manager in Texas. He has been a D&DH field editor for more than 25 years.





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# 7 THINGS TO DO BEFORE CROSSBOW SEASON

COME CROSSBOW SEASON, IT'S IMPORTANT TO MAKE SURE EVERYTHING IS IN WORKING ORDER.

It's amazing how time flies these days. Nearly a year has passed since giving any thought to our crossbow, to say nothing of putting our hands on it, and once again deer season is just around the corner.


Today's high-end crossbows are the finest ever built, but by their inherent design, all crossbows incorporate moving parts and components that over time wear down due to stress and usage. Strings and cables stretch, trigger housing gets dirty, scopes accidentally and unknowingly get bumped, and nuts and bolts loosen — all of which can affect reliability and accuracy, but even more importantly, make a crossbow less safe to shoot.

With this in mind, here are a few important things to get ready for deer season.









*To maintain peak performance, modern crossbows need some TLC and routine maintenance before, during and after each hunting season.*

### MAKE SURE IT'S CLEAN

Before doing anything, make sure the crossbow is clean. Exterior stock and rail dust that may have collected during storage since last hunting season can be wiped away with a soft, damp (not wet) cotton cloth and then wiped dry. Flight rail grooves can be easily cleaned with a Q-tip or by lightly blasting with compressed air. I've found the canisters of keyboard cleaner available at office supply and most department stores work great. They come with a straw that attaches to the nozzle, making it easy to target flight rail grooves, trigger, cocking and safety mechanisms, and other hard-to-reach areas.

### GIVE YOUR CROSSBOW A PHYSICAL

Every year, generally well in advance of hunting season, I make a point of having an annual physical just to make sure the old ticker is working the way it should and everything else is up to par. When it's over and things check out, I feel pretty good about things. I do the same thing to my crossbow, giving

it a complete and thorough once-over to make sure everything is in good shape. It's something everyone should do, ideally well in advance of the season opener in case something requires replacing and fixing.

Most of the things that should be checked out are pretty basic such as the assortment of screws, bolts and fasteners that hold the bow together. This includes the stirrup set screws, any stock and primary assembly bolts and set screw, scope mounts and especially any rail screws. Although they may have been tight and secure when the bow was originally assembled, these fasteners are under constant tension, and over time, vibration can cause them to loosen. If that happens, not only does safety become an increasing factor but noise levels can increase, and accuracy, especially consistent accuracy, can be affected. At the same time, rub your fingers gently along the rail and on compound bows around the cams, looking for any nicks that might not be clearly visible.

Equally important, if not more

so, are the cables and string on compound bows. Today's strings and cables are far superior than those of just a few years ago, and with proper maintenance as recommended by the manufacturer, will provide years of reliable service with occasional hunting use, but over time they show signs of wear. Check for hairline cracks or other signs of wear in the cable and any fraying along the string, especially around those areas that come in contact with the cams. Whether the bow is a compound or recurve model, because it comes in direct contact with the rail and is susceptible to lots of friction, special attention should be given to the center serving. If there is any sign of separation showing the string underneath it, sign of excessive wear or any fraying, the string should be replaced. If that proves to be the case, the cables on compound bows should be replaced at the same time since the string and cables will stretch over time and typically at the same rate. A new string with older cables or vice-versa can affect the crossbow's efficiency.





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- Will Brantley, Field & Stream



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*Always allow your crossbow to “air out” before bringing it indoors and storing it for any prolonged period of time. Moisture, dust and dirt can become a problem for string and cable connections and other moving parts.*

### **GIVE IT A GREASE AND WAX JOB**

It's a cardinal rule that all crossbows should be regularly maintained by following the guidelines outlined in the owner's manual that comes with every new crossbow. Generally, this means waxing the string and cables, lubricating the trigger and cocking mechanisms and other moving components per the manufacturer's instruction. This also includes lubricating the flight rail after every 75 to 100 shots unless specifically recommended sooner or later by the manufacturer. But it never hurts to reapply wax and lubricants before the season opener. Doing so will make sure all components are properly protected and will work as required in the event of

inclement weather. It also means lubricating the axles and cam bearings, and trigger, safety and cocking mechanisms if called for and recommended by the maker. Although all crossbow lubricants and wax are basically the same, only those recommended or supplied by the manufacturer should be used.

One other thing is important here, too. Crossbow scopes with illuminated reticles are popular these days, and they have their advantages during low-light conditions. As part of the preseason maintenance routine, check the battery. Better yet, even if the battery still has some life, change it for a new one, keeping the older one in your pack as an in-the-field backup just in case. Even new

batteries go dead or lose energy in a hurry, especially if left on for long periods or if we forget to turn them off at the end of the day.

### **SHOOT TO MAKE SURE**

Getting out with a crossbow in hand and plinking at a target several weeks before the season opens does several important things, each critical to a success in the event there's an opportunity to release an arrow.

First among them is to make sure the bow is operating properly. Does the cocking mechanism work smoothly, does the arrow load into the trigger mechanism easily, and do the safety and trigger operate as they should? When the trigger is pulled, is there any unfamiliar noise or noticeable or unusual vibration? Everything should operate, sound and feel as if the bow is right out of the box. If it doesn't, plinking a target early will provide the necessary time to address the issue. It's always better to find out before the season commences rather than when we have a deer in our sights.

Another thing: Getting out early reassures the bow is still zeroed in. Start off at 25 yards just like you did when you first sighted it in. Chances are things haven't changed, but there's only one way to find out, and before opening day is the time to do it. None of us are getting younger either. Even a slight change in eyesight might demand readjusting the scope for better eye relief or clarity. Some of today's crossbow scopes can be calibrated to a specific arrow speed. Shooting early also provides time to recalibrate if necessary.

### **PRACTICE LIKE YOU HUNT**

Despite our best efforts, releasing an arrow in most hunting situations is seldom an ideal setup. Instead of sitting comfortably at a shooting bench and taking our sweet time sighting a stationary target 25 or 30 yards away, releasing from elevated positions, cramped quarters, perhaps after twisting and swinging the bow left or right, sometimes at a target that's moving or ready to move, are the norm. It's a whole different ball game.

While it's important a crossbow



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is pinpoint accurate and everything operates properly, practicing the way we hunt can prove beneficial. It's been nearly a year, after all, since last hunting season, and even hunters with years of experience might need a refresher course shooting from the confines of a blind, offhand while sitting or kneeling, and especially judging downward angles at various distances and keeping the crossbow horizontally level when required to shoot at left or right angles from

elevated stands. Known as canting, there is a tendency to drop one limb lower than the other on the swing. Given today's crossbow speeds, at 20- and 25-yard shots, canting might not prove much of an issue. But beyond that, and the longer the shot, the more the point of impact will be off.

It is also helpful to use a 3D target while practicing this way. Zeroing a crossbow on a block target is different than hitting the vitals of a deer from above ground,

offhand from a blind, or while sitting or kneeling.

### CHECK TREESTANDS & BLINDS

This really has little to do with getting a crossbow ready for hunting season, but it has a lot to do with safety and increasing the chances of success with a crossbow. A couple of my ladder stands stay up one season to the next. Even when not, before climbing aboard to practice is a good time to make sure the straps and binders are still in good shape and the stand is still secure. It is also a good time to reopen shooting lanes. If hunting from a blind, it is a good time to set them up and let them air out and make any necessary repairs.

### STORE IT PROPERLY

The best way to prolong crossbow life and reduce the amount of preseason preparedness is properly storing it away at the end of hunting season. This includes a quick dusting with a damp cloth and wiping it dry, rechecking and applying rust preventative to nuts, fasteners and metal parts, relubricating the trigger and cocking mechanisms, axels and cam bearings, and rewaxing the string and cables. This also includes stowing the bow in a soft or hard case in a dry location.

Whether the cables or strings require replacement, it's important to make sure your crossbow is properly tuned, that is making sure the brace height, tiller and timing are spot on. This is rarely an issue with today's high-end bows in the short term but can develop over time, so it's important to check for any tell-tale signs: arrows impacting the target higher or lower, more to the left or right than in previous years, or wear marks along one side of the arrow.

— Al Raychard is a D&DH contributor and avid crossbow hunter from Maine.



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| JOHN J. OZOGA

# WHEN DEER AREN'T IN SYNCH



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## SCIENTIFIC ANALYSIS OF THE MOVEMENTS OF PEAK AND POST-RUT FEMALES CAN HELP MANAGERS BETTER CHART REPRODUCTIVE SUCCESS.

If you hunt whitetails during their breeding season — as most of us do — but don't understand the breedable doe's behavior, you could be in trouble. Like it or not, the buck you hunt is at the mercy of the estrous doe.

Or is he?

Plotting out-of-season buck movements, monitoring weather conditions, determining food sources, calculating moon phases, and so on, might be important and can contribute to success. No doubt a host of factors could provide clues about a buck's travel patterns. But all too often the estrous doe is the most potent force in determining a buck's whereabouts, behavior and vulnerability. All of your careful plotting and meticulous strategies will likely go down the tube if the estrous doe unexpectedly appears in the wrong place at the right time.

### ENERGY VS ACTIVITY

Wildlife managers are also concerned about deer activity, especially during the breeding season, but for different reasons than the hunter. With regard to a deer's welfare, there's a definite relationship between the amount of energy taken in (food) vs. the amount spent (activity). An energy deficit during autumn, for whatever reason, can hurt a deer's physical condition, interfere with reproduction and lower survival rates during the critical winter months.

The rut is characterized by greatly increased movement among all deer, but especially so by bucks. Therefore, the rut demands that deer spend a lot of energy. Sometimes, greatly increased buck activity can be linked to higher-than-normal buck mortality during winter.

Mounting evidence also suggests an energy deficit during autumn can diminish the doe's physical condition and her breeding success. This means the rut's social stress can have the same damaging effects as nutritional stress on deer. Increased social (behavioral) stress can cause increased activity, depressed physical condition, delayed breeding, lower conception rates, increased foraging and damage to the environment. Ultimately, such factors lead to unhealthy fawns or no offspring at all.

### RESEARCH RESULTS

Louis Verme and I explored the activity patterns of estrous whitetails more than 30 years ago. Consequently, I was captivated by an article in the *Journal of Mammalogy* by Rick Relyea and Stephen Demarais, titled, "Activity of Desert Mule Deer During the Breeding Season."

Using motion-sensitive radio-collars, Relyea and Demarais found activity for mule deer bucks and does increased from pre-rut to post-rut. They also observed that bucks were most active around sunrise and sunset (crepuscular) during pre-rut and post-rut, but that female mule deer shifted their normal daily rhythm from being most active during twilight hours in pre-rut to constant during peak rut, followed by low levels of crepuscular activity during post-rut.

Relyea and Demarais speculated that changes in daily activity patterns of females could be caused by harassment of females by males. In their words, "Assuming our radio-collared females were bred during peak rut and a male could not differentiate a bred female from an unbred female until he



approached her closely, pregnant females could reduce interactions with males by becoming less active during times of greatest activity of males and more active during times of lowest activity of males.”

Because the behavior of mule deer differs quite markedly from that of whitetails during the breeding season, certain species’ differences in activity patterns during the rut are expected. For one thing, white-tailed bucks also move outside of their normal home range, but only during peak rut, not normally throughout the pre-rut to post-rut period as with mule deer.

Most studies show that white-tailed does move shorter distances per day and concentrate their activities on a smaller portion of their range during the rut. During peak rut, females become more active, but tend to crisscross a smaller area. The advantage of this behavior is that the doe’s urinary signals are concentrated during the breeding period,

thereby enhancing doe-to-buck communication during the doe’s short receptive period.

That means whitetails are most active during peak rut because bucks are traveling outside their home range searching for does, and does are walking intensively in a small area to attract bucks. Such behavior ceases after the breeding period.

#### RUT-TIME INSIGHTS

While monitoring activity patterns of penned whitetails (using an elaborate array of wiring, microswitches and event-recorders), I accidentally discovered that does became restless and began pacing in their pens shortly before mating. This observation led to a more intensive investigation of doe activity patterns during estrus, which we later published in the *Journal of Wildlife Management*. Ultimately, we used a measure of the doe’s activity as a means of predicting estrus. That information proved valuable in other

reproductive studies and during some sophisticated studies of blood hormone changes around the doe’s estrous period.

Our studies with penned does revealed that a doe will accept a buck only during a 24- to 36-hour period at peak estrus. However, we observed that in the absence of a tending buck, the doe became about 28 times more active than normal one to two nights before estrus. This restlessness coincides with increased ovarian production of estrogen, the female hormone that precipitates a doe’s mating urge. In fact, we calculated that one doe walked more than 20 miles the night before she mated. Based on our findings, we theorized that such an increase in doe travel would be adaptive, in that the estrous doe would then more likely find a mate if one were not nearby.

Stefan Holzenbein and George Schwede tested our theory by monitoring the activities of eight radio-collared does at the National Zoo’s Conservation and Research

*Tracking of wild, radio-collared does has shown they often make themselves easier to locate prior to coming into estrus by restricting movements to a core area. Bucks can then find receptive does much more quickly.*

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*Scientific studies have clearly demonstrated that deer density stress and social subordination – independent of nutrition – can alter a doe's rate of physical maturation and reproductive performance.*

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Center at Front Royal, Virginia. Instead of wandering extensively, however, seven of the does they tracked restricted their movements to core areas of their home range around the time of estrus. Bucks were apparently readily available and quick to locate does as they came into estrus. Presumably, all seven does were bred within core areas of their normal range.

Holzenbein and Schwede concluded that does usually make their location predictable by restricting their movements before becoming receptive, making it relatively easy for a buck to find them. Also, such a concentration of doe activity likely accounts for a buck's tendency to cluster his scrapes in certain locations where he might attract the greatest attention from prospective mates. However, if a doe attains estrus without being found by a buck, she might wander extensively in search of a buck.

### SUPPRESSING EFFECTS

Some researchers suggest that estrus among all but the youngest of related reproducing females should be synchronous, because estrus can be induced by male-produced pheromones. If so, it's also conceivable that females compete

for the attention of choice mates.

Subordination tends to have a strong suppressor effect on a doe's reproductive performance. Older, maternally experienced does within a clan are most dominant; they also control the most favorable habitat, maintain the best physical condition, and usually breed first. Therefore, if a dominant doe and a subordinate doe come into estrus at the same time, the dominant doe might displace the subordinate and copulate first. If this is the case, subordinate does are more likely to delay mating, more readily mate with a subordinate male, and are more inclined to go searching for mates.

There's some experimental evidence that suggests does are indeed "mate selective," thereby responding more positively to one suitor than another. In our studies at the Cusino enclosure in northern Michigan, for example, we found that does were more receptive to bucks similar to them in age. That is, mature does preferred to be courted by mature, rut-experienced bucks, while yearling does seemed intimidated by the real monarchs.

As researchers Larry Marchinton and Karl Miller note: "The whole process of chasing and courtship is a very visible

one that exposes participants to risk from predators, both human and otherwise. This is the only time of the year when white-tailed deer, particularly bucks, forsake cover and put themselves into vulnerable positions."

Marchinton and Miller emphasize that such seemingly neurotic behavior has strong selective values. "It allows the doe to be bred by the most physically superior buck in the area. She dashes around in anthropomorphic terms, making quite a spectacle of herself — so that the local bucks become aware of her impending receptivity and join her entourage, at least until they are displaced by the largest buck. This competition among suitors usually assures that her offspring will be sired by the best buck she can find."

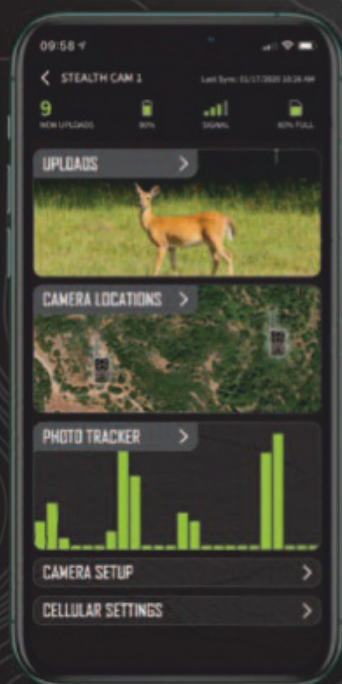
On the other hand, if adult does of a clan regroup during the breeding period, several does might come into estrus in the same general area within relatively few days. If several socially regrouped does come into estrus only a day or two apart, a dominant buck might remain with the clan a few days and breed several does in fairly rapid succession. In such cases, your potential trophy might





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be pretty well anchored in some distant location for a period of days, leaving you to ponder the reasons for his sudden departure from an otherwise predictable routine.

### LOTS OF VARIABLES

Keep in mind that many factors can account for differences in the estrous doe's behavior from one area to the next, which might have a strong bearing on buck behavior and hunting success. The timing, length and intensity of the breeding season, as well as the estrous doe's behavior, might differ sharply from North to South in particular. Important factors such as herd density and sex-age composition, which are often determined by the timing and intensity of buck harvesting, will greatly influence the stability and predictability of deer behavior during the rut.

In the North, the rut tends to be short but intense where we also see distinct regrouping of related females during pre-rut, especially in moderate- to high-density deer populations. The North's hunting

seasons also tend to be held later, usually during or shortly after peak rut. In contrast, many Southern states have early deer seasons, sometimes resulting in a high buck harvest before peak rut. In some cases, buck harvesting might be so extreme that a buck shortage develops during the peak breeding period. This can produce erratic behavior by estrous does searching for mates.

One thing that has always impressed me about whitetails is their high degree of social order and elaborate communication used during the rut, especially when mature bucks are present. On the other hand, chaotic rut behavior prevails when intensive buck harvesting leaves only yearling bucks to fill the role of herd sires. You'll find that the seek-and-chase style of courtship among yearling bucks differs greatly from the more ritualized soliciting of attention demonstrated by rut-experienced mature bucks.

### CONCLUSION

If you hunt a socially unbalanced deer herd in which mature sires are

absent or in short supply, expect the local does to exhibit peculiar behavior during that brief period when they are in rut.

— John Ozoga has been D&DH's top research contributor for more than 25 years. He is a retired deer research biologist.

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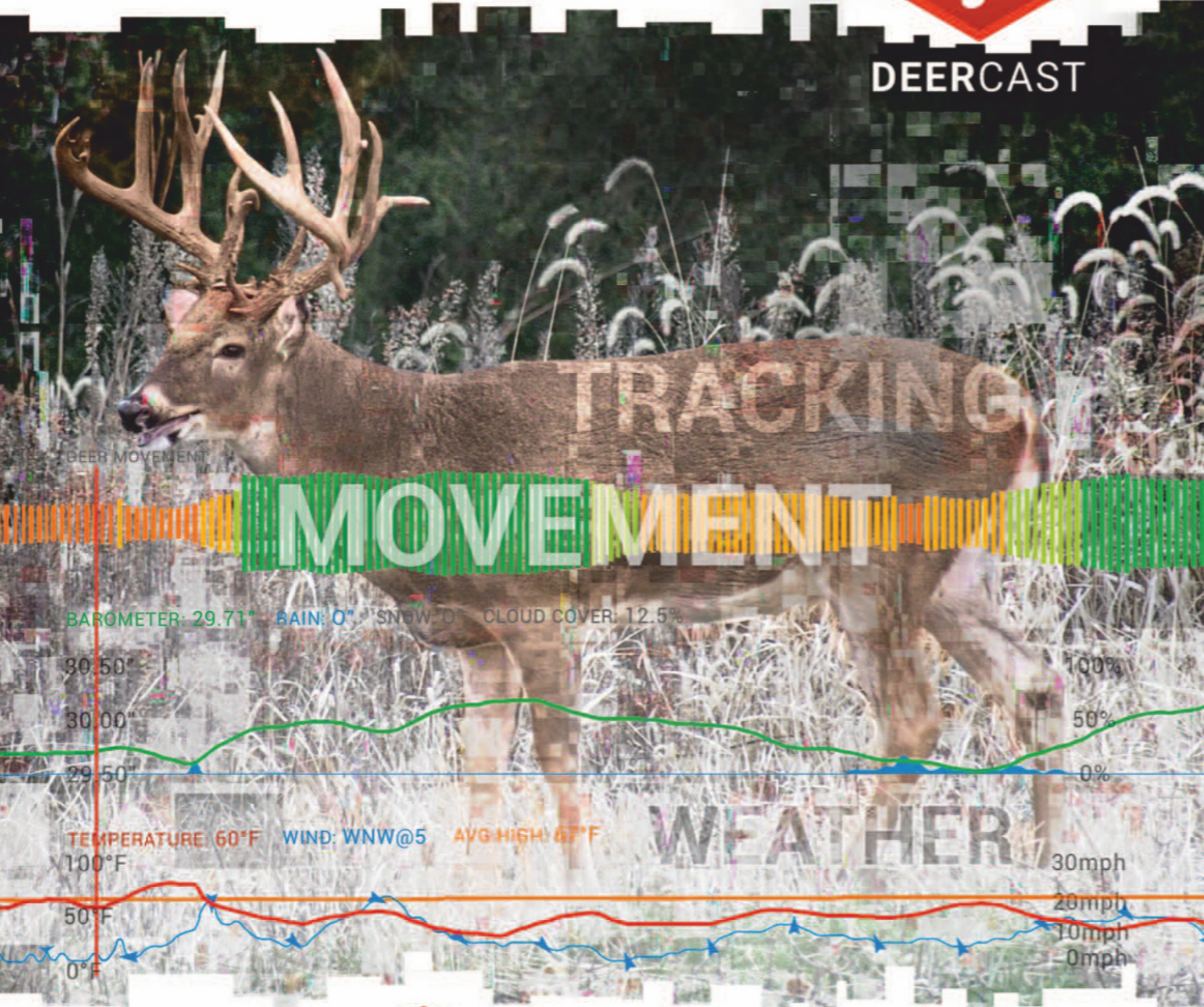
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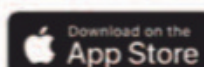
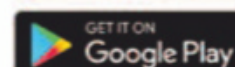


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# SPEED SCOUTING

**SCOUTING BEFORE THE SEASON OFTEN TURNS BUCKS NOCTURNAL, YET HOW CAN YOU BOWHUNT A SPOT WITHOUT SCOUTING IT? TRY THE AUTHOR'S QUICK, LOW-IMPACT STRATEGY**

**H**ow many times have you seen or heard of a nice buck that consistently feeds at the same location every evening during summer only to disappear just before the season? In areas with heavy consequential hunting pressure, that vanishing act happens far more frequently than not. Unknowingly, many hunters create the situation with overzealous pre-season scouting and location preparation.



## TYPICAL SCOUTING: ACTIONS AND CONSEQUENCES

By traipsing through the woods, busting through brush, hanging stands, clearing shooting lanes and marking entry and exit routes just before the season, hunters in areas with heavy consequential hunting pressure, or HCHP, let mature bucks know it's time to alter their vulnerable summer habits to elude intruders.

What do I consider an HCHP spot? Areas where bowhunter densities exceed 10 per square mile and gun-hunter densities are double that opening day, and where almost every one of those hunters targets any legal antlered buck. In such spots, many hunters believe if they pass a buck, the deer will get killed by the neighbors after it crosses the fence.

In HCHP areas, bucks of all age groups must learn quickly how to avoid hunters. Otherwise they get wounded or killed. Few bucks survive beyond 2½ years, and those that do likely have suffered

consequences from previous hunter encounters and carry old wounds.

Deer can't differentiate between scouting and hunting, and after a winter, spring and summer of being left alone, they view the sudden influx of human activity in their core area as an immediate threat. They react by assuming more nocturnal movement habits. When hunting for mature bucks in HCHP areas, improper pre-season scouting can ruin any chance of success before the rut, when bucks start thinking with more than just their brains.

In HCHP areas, even something as benign as hanging a motion camera can have catastrophic results on an area's potential. Deer don't know you just want to take their picture. Your intrusion is a threat to their existence.

An HCHP area should not be confused with heavily hunted areas that have hunter engagement criteria or rules. In such spots — large managed areas or on pay-to-hunt ranches with specific age or antler criteria rules — there are no

consequences for daytime activity by bucks until they reach the kill criteria. Therefore, numerous hunters only represent a human presence, not a consequential threat to a buck as it grows to maturity. In such areas, when a buck meets the kill criteria, his lack of fear from previous non-consequential hunter encounters makes him extremely vulnerable and relatively easy to hunt and kill.

But how can you hunt without scouting? Here's how I do it.

## POST-SEASON PREP

In HCHP areas, which include everywhere I hunt in Michigan, I conduct more than 80% of my scouting and tree preparation after the season. Why? Before spring green-up, I can molest any property without concern of spooking deer, and I find sign from the previous rut, such as rubs, ground scrapes, licking branches and rut traffic areas. More than 55% of record-book bucks are taken during the brief rut phases, so sign from the



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previous rut is primarily what I search for and set up on.

During my post-season scouting ventures, I also search for early-season hunting locations. All early-season deer activity revolves around food, so that's what I seek.

In HCHP areas, the common practice of hunting along short crop-field edges for mature bucks doesn't cut it. Anyone who consistently takes mature bucks along perimeters of open crop edges is not hunting HCHP property.

Unless I know a field will be in standing corn, I eliminate crop-field edges from my list of potential locations. Standing corn offers food and security cover. If the sign warrants it and there's adequate transition cover to the area, I will set up locations along the perimeters of standing corn. When the corn is cut, I abandon those sites until the next time they're in standing corn.

My ideal early-season locations are destination feeding sites with perimeter and transition security cover to them from bedding areas. The secure feeding sites I seek include apple or pear trees, solitary white oaks in a sea of other types of trees, and red oaks if there are no white oaks. Fruit or mast trees should not be in a sea of similar trees. If they are, that location is not a destination site.

You can easily identify white oaks by the rounded lobes on their leaves and rough bark that extends all the way up the tree and out to the branches. Red oaks have smooth bark and pointed leaf lobes. Red and white oak acorns differ in flavor because of bitter tannins. Next fall, pick up one of each, and chew them. You will immediately know why deer gravitate to white oaks.

I prepare all trees, shooting lanes and entry and exit routes during the post-season, with no idea if the trees will offer food the next fall. That's where pre-season speed touring comes into play. I call it speed touring because that's what it is. I'm not scouting for new hunting locations. I'm just rapidly touring through previously prepared fruit and mast tree locations during midday to see if they offer food and current

buck activity. I've been pre-season speed touring for at least 25 of my 46 seasons but have always lumped it in with the standard term: pre-season scouting.

### TAKING A SPEED TOUR

Speed touring should always be done during midday, when most deer will be bedded, and — if possible — during inclement weather, such as a hard rain or windy conditions. Inclement weather will help mask your noise and dissipate human odor.

Unlike states with September archery openers, Michigan's season opens Oct. 1, so I wait until mid-September to speed tour my pre-set locations. Mature bucks across the upper Midwest typically shed their velvet by the first week of September, which lets me confirm fresh buck activity leading to or at my sites.

By mid- to late September, if isolated fruit and mast trees are dropping food, they will usually have fresh buck sign nearby. This usually includes rubs, scrapes, rub lines leading to a tree or large droppings under trees. If I don't find buck sign near trees that are dropping food, I note it and continue touring my sites before making early-season hunting plans.

When a location has adequate sign, I have work to do. I immediately clear the tree and shooting lanes of new summer growth that might impede a shot. Because I prepared the spot before summer, the re-preparation time is minimal. I never come back another day to re-prepare a location, because that would defeat the purpose of one low-impact intrusion.

Other than on public land — where I usually have to access my sites with waders, hip boots, a canoe or crawling on my hands and knees through brush to get away from other hunters — speed touring takes very little time per parcel because I've already identified the locations.

After I've toured my early-season locations and prepared the spots with food and sign, I form a plan of attack for the order I'll hunt them. This takes into account

which sites have mature buck sign, which are best suited for mornings or evenings, and which are best for a mature buck to transition to and feel comfortable during daylight.

The most critical question is which locations are in areas where pre-season scouting ventures from other hunters have the least impact on a buck I might pursue. As mentioned, in most areas I hunt, mature bucks (3½ and older) turn nocturnal before the season because of intrusive pre-season scouting by other hunters in their core areas.

Examples: Other than public land, by knocking on doors for permission, I currently have four parcels to hunt. I share 400 acres with three other hunters. About 260 acres of it is groomed crop fields, and the remaining 140 is mature timber devoid of any understory in which a mature buck might bed. When there's a mature buck in the area, he won't bed on the property unless it's in standing corn. For Michigan, 400 acres is a monstrous property, yet this parcel is not well suited for daytime mature buck activity. Why? Even though a mature buck might use the property, he beds on neighboring property and turns nocturnal because of the neighbors' intrusive pre-season scouting.

Although I have a couple of locations prepared at isolated apple trees and white oaks, I don't hunt that parcel early in the season. However, it can be productive for daytime mature buck activity during the rut, when mature bucks are pursuing does.

Another piece is 20 acres, and I share it with three other bowhunters. Although the parcel is small, it has a dense 7-acre bedding area we have agreed to stay out of. This is the densest bedding area in the section, and it always seems to hold a mature buck. There's one secluded apple tree on the property, with transition cover to the bedding area. Because I found it first, I have dibs on it, and the other hunters stay away. We're all on board with post-season tree preparation, and before the season, we tidy our locations on the same day, trying to stay as scent-free as possible. Then we hunt with extreme moderation.



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Because our pre-season speed clean-up doesn't interfere with where the mature buck beds, we're not altering his behavior. Two of us have been very successful at taking mature bucks on this parcel, but only I have had success during the first few days of season at the isolated apple tree. A parcel's size is never a prerequisite for its quality.

At a public location I've hunted for years, I have to crawl about 100 yards through tunnels under a canopy of autumn olive bushes to access a couple of isolated apple

trees. If the trees have apples, I'll put it in my early-season rotation. The spot also heats up later in the season as public-land hunters push deer back into the dense area.

### PUTTING TOGETHER THE PROGRAM

Let's put speed touring for early-season locations into perspective. Through years, I have lost permission and gained new permission more than I care to discuss, but I'm aware that goes with the territory in HCHP areas. Still, every year by the end of April,

I have at least 40 spots prepared for the upcoming season, most of which have been set up for years. On average, about half of the sites are at potential early-season locations because they fit the destination food criteria or are on routes from bedding areas to feeding locations.

When I speed tour, I require specific tools for location touch-up. The most important is scent-free clothing. It's almost impossible to completely mask the noise of a physical intrusion. However, your tour can be as scent-free as possible if you wear an activated carbon suit, gloves, cap, clean rubber boots and a clean pack.

The arsenal of scouting tools required for speed touring is minimal because you'll only be cleaning up new summer growth and possibly reflective-tacking some more trees along entry and exit routes. I take a compass, reflective tacks, a climbing harness, a 14-foot extension saw, a sheathed long-bladed camp saw, six tree steps — I remove the bottom six steps from most of my trees after post-season preparation — and, depending on how well I know the property, an aerial map.

If you must scout a new piece of property, you have no alternative but to be intrusive and alter deer traffic. But most of you likely have locations you've hunted for years. During one midday visit, try speed touring your locations for a couple of early-season sites, and do not return until opening day. In HCHP areas, taking a mature buck is extremely difficult, but some seasons, speed touring might give you an additional opportunity.

*Editors note: John Eberhart is an accomplished big-buck bowhunter from Michigan. He specializes in heavy consequential hunting pressure areas. You can learn more about his tactics through his instructional books and DVDs at [www.deer-john.net](http://www.deer-john.net)*

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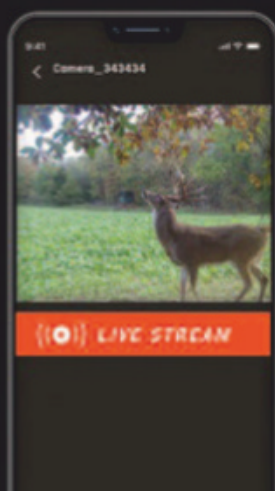
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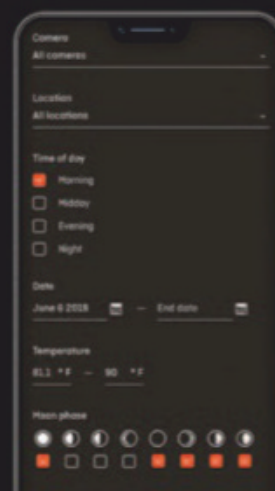
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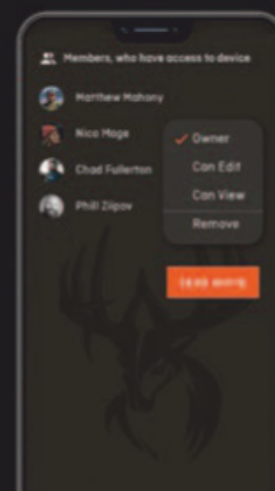
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**T**here's more to whitetail hunting than luck and unbridled enthusiasm.

Old adages persist because they normally hold some filament of truth. So although the saw about "10 percent of hunters killing 90 percent of game" might not be statistically accurate, we understand the notion and accept the reality. There's no way around the fact some hunters are more ambitious, others have more time than average and others more money to buy better places to hunt. Yet take out the exceptional circumstances and render them into an average blue-collar deer hunter plying average deer on average habitat, and give that nimrod a reasonable amount of time, horse sense and initiative, and I believe the 10/90 rule holds true because of three critical factors, which I call the Three F's: faith, fortitude and foresight.

Faith comes through smart and thorough scouting, and entering every hunt confident that success is inevitable. Fortitude means putting in your time and never giving up when the going gets tough. Foresight points to investments in preparation, letting you create your own luck.



## 1. FAITH

Confidence comes only through scouting and intimate knowledge of hunting terrain. Just before hunting seasons, non-obtrusive scouting is the name of the game. This involves sitting fencelines, observation stands (placed for maximum visibility if not for hunting) or vantages (hilltops, grain silos, haystacks or even parked farm equipment), or hovering over a spotting scope, watching clearcuts, burns, CRP field-edge cover or large agricultural fields of alfalfa, soybeans or clover. Such long-distance recon best lets you see what kind of bucks appear in specific areas and when, without undue human interference.

It's vitally important during such scouting missions to keep impact to a minimum, especially scent. Avoid bumping deer from critical feeding or core areas. Using carefully planned entrance and exit routes that minimize the potential for bumping deer is part of this. Move in well before deer arrive, and slip out under the cover of darkness. Late-summer or early-fall scouting should also entail pecking the

edges of core areas, assuring bucks remain in the dark regarding your activities. Alert target bucks before the season, and they'll become exponentially more difficult to hunt later.

Trail cameras are another obvious tool for scouting patterns and targeting specific bucks with minimum disturbance. One useful development involves plot-watch cameras, which capture an image every minute to provide insight into emergence points and feeding patterns well outside motion-detection range. Trail cameras are indispensable for scoping smaller plots, field corners, wooded or brushy areas, or places where direct observation is limited or risky.

Understand, though, that trail cameras can hurt efforts as much as aid. This is mostly because of the way we check those cameras, leaving tell-tale scent or creating direct disturbances by intruding too deeply into bedding or core areas.

During late summer or early fall, check cameras minimally and with great care. Check them only

when deer are assured of being elsewhere. Hot midday is normally the best. Approach camera sites as you might favorite tree stands, slipping in quietly while wearing scent-free boots and clothing, and spraying down cameras with scent-killing spray before departing. I had to learn the hard way about sloppy camera checking — checking cameras in duds and tennis shoes reeking of human odors, and checking them too often in my zeal to get my season underway — putting reliable deer off their patterns or turning them nocturnal because of my imprudence.

Learning more about bucks' core or bedding areas is best conducted after the season closes. There are several advantages. Spooking deer isn't the utter disaster after the season as during the season. Deer having nine months to get over disturbances. Also, rut sign, such as rubs and scrapes, is still evident. In addition, deer are in a defensive mode, providing insight into travel patterns and bedding areas that let them escape harvest during the open season. And by December,

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snow makes deciphering travel paths and beds much easier. Because of these factors, I find post-season scouting as important as traditional preseason forays.

## 2. FORTITUDE

Building faith through scouting is the bulwark of fortitude, providing confidence that stands are placed well, that bucks will eventually pass your way and that you have a handful of bucks reasonably patterned so hunting doesn't seem a complete shot in the dark. You need this fortitude to punch the alarm clock with vigor on those cold, dark mornings when it would be so much easier to sleep in, and to keep doing so when you haven't seen a buck for six consecutive days.

I know from experience that trail cams often provide a false sense of expectation. You scroll through two weeks of trail-camera photos and don't see the empty spaces between deer appearances, only the daylight appearances of trophy antlers. You picture yourself being there for those appearances, as if by appointment. But of course, deer hunting doesn't work that way. You must earn success through an investment of time. You must remain alert (awake most of all), because sometimes, a season-making buck gives you the briefest opportunity. My 2012 buck

was indicative. I sat 27 days that season, receiving a fleeting passing shot after only an hour on stand well into the season. Taking advantage of that shot — being there at all — required essentially 27 days of uninterrupted gumption.

I have to admit that stand hunting has always been tough on me. When I started whitetail hunting 25 years ago, I could manage only three hours on any stand, tops, before impatience, fidgets and wanderlust sent me on desperate still-hunting missions. I became pretty darn good at still-hunting but in the big picture killed fewer bucks. When I mentally forced myself to remain on stand, I was prone to falling asleep — without any form of fall-restraint system. I've become much more patient about stand hunting — and always wear a safety harness — but still admit that after a month of run-and-gun elk hunting, those first handful of October sits can prove excruciating. I don't really settle into the welcome Zen of stand sitting until November.

I guess I have to admit, too, much of my newfound patience and appreciation of stationary pursuit has come with better insulated hunting togs. I remember my early days of whitetail hunting as filled with chattering teeth and numb appendages. Today, I really can't recall the last time I was truly cold.

This has everything to do with modern base layers, such as First Lite Merino wool, a Carol Davis Sportswear Webfoot union suit and Warm-X heated long underwear; highly efficient insulating mid-layers, such as Sitka Gear Primaloft-filled Kelvin wear, First Lite Cocona Technology Umcompahgre Puffy and a Browning Add Heat Vest; weather-shedding outer layers with wind-blocking membranes, including Gore WindStopper and Robinson Outdoors' WindBlocker; or waterproof/breathable laminates, such as Gore Gore-Tex, Robinson RainBlocker or Cabela's DriPlus.

## 3. FORESIGHT

There's another saying in hunting that says you make your own luck. Before I understood the game more completely, I assigned luck to all whitetail hunting success. More recently, I've begun to feel more in control of my whitetail destiny. Luck now comes through being prepared.

I now work harder to hang stands at solid sites — well before the season — to help cover various or changing conditions. This has partly come through accumulated knowledge. When it's below zero, you'd better sit here. When snow accumulates, this particular stand will prove hot. When it's warm, deer will often drink here. When pressured, they go



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here. But there's more to it than that. Mostly I'm hinting at covering your bases, following changing winds and exercising the discipline necessary to sit your hottest spots only when conditions are perfect. In the Inland Northwest, for example, winds blow predominantly straight from the west on the average late-summer or fall day, commonly straight from the east when major winter storms are blowing in and only occasionally straight from the north. I'd guess 60 percent of my stands are situated to handle west-to-east winds, 39 percent east-to-west winds and 1 percent north winds only. East-to-west winds produce some of the best hunting of the season, arriving with cold temperatures that spark increased movement. Those are some of my best stands. The one or two north-wind stands I hang might not be occupied an entire season, but they can save the day in the heat of the rut with an early onset of winter.

Foresight is also vitally important in forming firm entrance and exit strategies for each stand. The best stand site in the country does little good if you're bumping deer on

your way in or out or leaving lots of scent behind in the process. Slipping in and out of productive stands undetected can mean walking ditches or creek beds or leaving earlier to hike a roundabout route to play the wind. In the bigger picture, I also start seasons at the edges of core areas, slowly moving inward as the season progresses. This means approaching things extremely conservatively early and penetrating core areas only as I become more desperate as the season begins to wind down.

Preparation also hinges on things such as cutting shooting lanes; establishing mineral licks, where legal; pruning and fertilizing fruit or oak trees to make them more productive; creating brush fences or cutting trails to better direct deer movement past stands based on prevailing winds; or planting no-till food plots with products such as Evolved Habitats' Throw-N-Go or white clover seed, where baiting isn't legal. These are summer chores; hard work that can reap huge rewards months down the road.

And, obviously, you can't put

tags on deer you miss. Every off-season should become a journey toward better shooting — extending maximum effective range to expand opportunities and getting tighter groups no matter the range. This is part of your duty as a hunter, but it's also why some hunters come home with venison and some finish the season empty-handed. If bad shooting has become your nemesis, invest in pro-shop coaching or instructional material (my book *The Bowhunter's Guide To Better Shooting* a fine example) to rid yourself of bad habits.

Successful whitetail hunting is all about many parts coming together flawlessly — and, yes, just a little luck. The Three F's assure you approach every season with a winning attitude and game plan.

— Patrick Meitin is a former hunting guide and ardent big-game bowhunter. He resides in Idaho.





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# How **PRESSURE** **AFFECTS DEER** Movement







## ARE WE PATTERNING DEER OR HAVE THEY PATTERNED US?

**Y**ou've heard the same story time and time again: A dedicated deer hunter spends the summer months meticulously setting up and monitoring game cameras to see what deer are likely to be using the property during the upcoming season. With some luck, a shooter buck turns up and all efforts become focused on learning his particular movement patterns. By early fall the stands are hung and he is still consistently showing up right where he needs to be. It's now the night before opening morning and the hunter drifts to sleep, feeling as though tomorrow's hunt will go exactly as planned.

As you know if you've ever been this hunter, opening morning often does not go as planned, nor do many of the subsequent hunts throughout the season. Often, the deer that you've worked so hard to pattern completely change their behavior or seem to disappear altogether once you begin hunting them. Other times, you might successfully harvest the deer you're after, but it usually doesn't happen quite the way you had planned, and your success can often be attributed just as much to luck as skill.



What is it about white-tailed deer that makes them so hard to predict? For one thing, deer are perceptive creatures that seem to become more wary of their surroundings with age and experience. Deer are also highly adaptable, capable of employing a variety of behavioral changes to avoid hunters, depending on the situation at hand.

### DEER RESPONSE TO HUNTING

Previous research has revealed much about how hunting pressure influences white-tailed deer behavior. Whether, and how strongly, deer respond to hunting activity can vary widely from one property to the next, however, and often depends on a variety of factors, including the amount of hunting pressure put on the herd, as well as the availability of escape cover.

In a study conducted in Maryland by North Carolina State University, low levels of hunting pressure had no noticeable effect on the behavior of adult bucks except for causing occasional, short-distance flights when deer entered the immediate proximity of a hunter. Only in nine of 23 instances when a buck came within about 100 yards of an occupied treestand did it bother to change direction or exhibit a flight response. Furthermore, flight movements were short-lived and bucks soon resumed normal activity within those same areas.

An entirely different response was seen by Mississippi State University researchers who monitored adult bucks in Oklahoma that were exposed to one hunter for every 75 acres. Over the course of the two-week hunting season, bucks dramatically reduced their distance traveled and began utilizing smaller areas more intensively in what was interpreted by researchers as an effort to avoid being seen.

Behavioral changes were also observed among adult female deer during a study conducted out of the University of Florida. Adult does moved farther from roads where hunting pressure was concentrated. Although they did not reduce their home range in response to hunting, they began avoiding open habitats such as clear-cuts, and instead showed preference for swamps and mature timber with more cover.

In both previous examples where deer showed a behavioral response to hunting, forests or bottomlands were a prominent component of the landscape. With the availability of habitats that provide ample cover, deer are likely to respond to concentrated hunting pressure by utilizing those areas more and avoiding open areas. In regions with mostly open terrain, however, deer might respond by expanding their movements, often venturing outside of their normal areas of use.

In a study conducted in South Dakota during the late 1960s, researchers reported that hunting activity resulted in deer making a number of long-distance movements extending 2 to 14 miles outside of their normal home range, and attributed these responses to the lack of available cover on the landscape.

In general, previous research tells us that although hunting doesn't always cause deer to alter their movements, higher levels of hunting pressure are more likely to elicit a behavioral response. Additionally, in prime deer habitat with an abundance of thick bedding areas and places to hide from hunters, deer will not need to go far to find security, and instead are likely to reduce their movements and start using cover more heavily when they feel threatened.

### FALLING INTO A "RUT"

Without question, knowledge concerning the response by deer to hunting pressure is at an all-time high, and hunters everywhere regularly employ strategic approaches in an effort to reduce their impact on deer movements. However, as much as they claim to understand deer behavior, the actions of hunters tell a different story. For example, every avid deer hunter is familiar with the rut and some likely already have their calendars marked and are counting down the days until bucks will be chasing does again this fall. Yet it seems most deer hunters also have a kind of "rut" that they fall into once deer season gets started. Consistent and repeated hunting patterns might render the behavior of hunters even more predictable to deer than deer behavior is to hunters, ultimately reducing the chances of bagging that trophy buck ... or any deer for that matter.

While conducting research to

examine movement and mortality patterns of deer in Alabama, we noted some disturbing patterns within the behavior of both deer and deer hunters, and the combination of these patterns has the potential to significantly limit hunter success. Deer hunters in Alabama were observed spending the vast majority of their time afield on weekends (Friday-Sunday), with far less hunting effort being expended throughout the rest of the week. This repetitive pattern is presumably driven by busy work and family schedules, leaving very little free time outside of weekends for recreation. Consider the impact that this pattern might have on deer.

Hunters on both public and private lands pile into the woods each Friday afternoon and head home on Sundays. During weekends throughout deer season, in contrast to weekdays, deer's olfactory, audio and visual senses are bombarded with stimuli indicating that hunters are in the vicinity. As a result, deer likely feel considerable predatory (hunting) pressure during those few days each week that get hunted the most. By repeating this cycle of hunting pressure week after week, hunters might be making themselves easy to pattern and could be causing deer to adjust their behavior during the days when hunters are most active.

In order to examine deer movement relative to the observed hunting pattern, we had a number of adult, male and female, white-tailed deer fitted with GPS collars, allowing comparisons between deer behavior on weekends, when hunting activity was greatest, and the rest of the week. A preliminary look at the movements of 10 of these animals revealed an interesting trend.

Throughout the last five weeks of the season, which included the peak breeding period as well as the period of highest hunting pressure, daytime movement by deer was the greatest on Thursdays and Fridays, just before all of the hunters showed up. By Saturday, daytime movement had already dropped 22 percent and by Sunday, daytime movement was down 34 percent compared to the start of the weekend. This rapid and dramatic behavioral response is a strong indicator that deer are responding to the increase in hunting pressure by reducing movement during daytime



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hours in an effort to minimize their probability of encountering a hunter.

Another interesting observation about the behavior of these deer was that their movement remained suppressed on both Monday and Tuesday, even though hunters, for the most part, were not afield. We speculate that deer took a couple of additional days to assess the environment for danger before deciding that the risk associated with movement during daylight hours had subsided. By Wednesday and Thursday, daytime movement had returned to normal, just in time for the weekend hunters.

We also looked at three other indicators of deer activity and each time found the same basic pattern where activity declined throughout the weekend, remained low on Monday and Tuesday, and began returning to normal levels on Wednesday. In addition to traveling less during daylight hours, deer tended to utilize progressively smaller areas throughout the weekend, but began moving more broadly across the landscape later in the week once hunting pressure had declined. Deer also became more nocturnal, allocating more of their movement to nighttime hours. Finally, deer were inactive for longer periods during the day, staying bedded during more daylight hours as the weekend progressed. Each of these changes in behavior occurred simultaneous to the influx of hunters to the woods and returned to normal within a couple of days of hunters leaving. So ... who is patterning who?

### WHAT THIS MEANS FOR HUNTERS

Although we've known for some time that high levels of hunting pressure can influence deer movement, it's not often we see such a clear change in behavior that directly reflects the tendencies of hunters. Research findings such as these have some major implications for all deer hunters, particularly those who hunt on public land or share private land with others. In areas that receive a lot of hunting pressure, and that also have plenty of cover, creating opportunities to harvest a deer could be challenged by a sudden and dramatic decrease in deer movement. As you can imagine, if deer are moving less during daylight hours and confining their movements to the thickest cover on the property,

it could explain a lot about why deer have a tendency to "disappear."

Our preliminary findings suggest that a hunter's chances of harvesting a deer start to decline after the first day of the weekend and don't improve until hunting pressure has subsided for at least two days. This isn't to say that deer, including some monster bucks, can't be harvested on weekends. Nonetheless, for those who hunt in areas that are heavily pressured on weekends and less pressured throughout the week, which appears to be common, it's possible the deer are changing their behavior to minimize the chances of a human encounter.

The harsh reality is that this phenomenon is impacting practically all hunters, even those who hunt private property and are extremely careful regarding the pressure they put on the deer herd. Because white-tailed deer are capable of occupying areas much larger than the typical parcel of private property, there is very little chance that the deer you hunt are exposed only to your hunting pressure. Although some rare exceptions might exist in the case of extremely large tracts of private land and high-fence facilities, the vast majority of hunters will have to contend with the patterns of hunting pressure on adjacent properties and the influence they have on the deer they hunt.

### CONCLUSIONS

So, have white-tailed deer learned how to predict when to take cover based on the repeated patterns of hunters? We won't go that far — however, the data suggest that white-tailed deer are highly perceptive creatures with an uncanny ability to know when hunters are most active. The tendency of hunters to concentrate their hunting efforts on weekends, with much less time spent hunting throughout the rest of the week, appears to be a huge red flag to deer, indicating that they should shut down their movements until the storm passes. In addition, by spending a lot of time in the woods on days when deer are least active, hunters might be limiting their chances of harvesting deer, particularly older individuals with more experience dealing with hunters.

Sadly, it seems that sportsmen are paying the price for the busy lives they

lead. While a dramatic response in deer movement to hunting patterns might be of little concern to some, those with a limited number of days to spend in the field or who want to maximize the likelihood of bagging a deer might feel differently.

The good news is that hunters can use these findings to their advantage to increase the chances of bringing home some venison this fall. We suggest that in addition to trying to pattern the deer on the property you hunt, you take a little time to examine your own patterns. If you find that your hunting behavior is highly predictable, then consider developing a plan to break out of the "rut." In doing so, we're confident that your time afield will become much more productive and satisfying.

— *Dr. Steve Ditchkoff is a professor in the School of Forestry and Wildlife Sciences at Auburn University. He manages the deer research program at Auburn and has been conducting research on white-tailed deer for 25 years.*

— *Kevyn Wiskirchen is a deer biologist with the Missouri Department of Conservation. He holds a master's degree from Auburn University under the supervision of Dr. Ditchkoff. His thesis research was focused on whitetail mortality patterns and responses to hunting pressure.*

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# THE LONELIEST GAME

**THERE'S A VERY SMALL LEGION OF WHITETAIL HUNTERS WHO HAVE TAKEN THE SPORT TO SUCH AN EXTREME LEVEL THAT MOST FOLKS CAN'T COMPREHEND IT. IS THIS CHALLENGE FOR YOU?**

**L**ike thousands of other deer hunters across the country, the bowhunter was back at work after an extended November vacation chasing whitetails. He knew what to expect, having been in that situation many times before. His co-workers knew he saved all his vacation time every year to take advantage of the November whitetail rut. Their initial greetings were always the same: "Did you get your buck?"

That year, his response was the same as it was most years. "No, not this year." The answer seemed to come easier each season, and it no longer bothered him to admit he had not filled his tag. When other hunters returned to work with photos of their bucks, he would simply offer sincere congratulations while listening to their stories and checking out their hero shots. In fact, he almost came to enjoy the ribbing he took from his non-hunting co-workers when they teased him because the workplace buffoon had killed a buck but he hadn't.



There was no need to explain it. They wouldn't understand. Even the ones who were very good deer hunters had no idea he had taken the sport to a level very few would comprehend or even realize existed. His tag had gone unfilled, but he secretly knew he had accomplished things most whitetail hunters never will.

He had passed up legitimate shooting opportunities at more than two dozen bucks during his vacation and even managed to get two mature whitetail bucks within can't-miss range of his stands. Yet he never loosed an arrow or even considered shooting the deer. Either buck would have been the deer of a lifetime for any of his co-workers, but the bucks weren't quite up to par for his goal. To share that info would have branded him a braggart or a liar. He had learned that lesson the hard way in past seasons and now simply enjoyed his "success" alone. Another unfilled tag wouldn't make him less of a hunter any more than killing one of those bucks would have. He knew where he stood, and his satisfaction came from within.

### THE UPPER ECHELON

Although that scenario is somewhat fictitious, it's not entirely fabricated. There's a very small legion of whitetail hunters who have taken the sport to such an extreme level that even most successful and accomplished trophy hunters cannot comprehend it. Such rare individuals don't just kill trophy bucks that would make most other hunters drool. They also let true monster bucks walk as they seek only real giants — the biggest of the big. I'm not talking about guys who let 150-inch bucks walk. I'm talking about folks who give a free pass to much bigger bucks as they wait for something even larger.

I've had the good fortune to meet thousands of deer hunters, yet I can think of only three or four who have reached that level. What makes a whitetail hunter pass bucks that would make most hunters jump for joy? I believe these guys embrace and accept the true challenges deer hunting offers. When they conquer one challenge, they raise the bar and strive for the next level. After they have tagged a few bucks of a specific size, they are no longer satisfied with bucks of that caliber. They seek the greater

challenge offered by bucks of the next size and age class. Unfilled tags are nothing more than the price for getting better, and they're certainly not a source of embarrassment for someone striving to reach a level few hunters can comprehend. They embrace the challenge the way a typical deer hunter embraces filled tags.

These hunters are so rare you likely don't know even one. Finding one can be as tough as finding one of the bucks they hunt. You won't find them on TV or among deer hunting's big-name celebrities. Producing a TV hunting show requires a lot of kills, and upper-echelon hunters aren't about racking up numbers of bucks. In fact, if you know a hunter who consistently kills better-than-average bucks year after year, he is not one of the rare hunters I'm talking about. When you're shooting for the moon, you will miss the target more often than you hit it. Unfilled tags and empty seasons are par for the course for this select group. Accepting that holds back most hunters who would dare to accept the challenge.

This group won't hunt with outfitters, not that there is anything wrong with that. To them, the challenge is lessened when outside help is employed. These guys accept the challenge one on one. They insist on doing their own scouting, hanging their own stands and making every decision that might lead to a filled tag. The kill is secondary to the journey.

When a hunter reaches that level, he is as different from the average deer hunter as an 8-year-old buck is from a buck fawn. In fact, that's a great analogy, as such a hunter is as mature as possible. He doesn't need to run around bragging about himself or boasting of his success. In fact, he's often a quiet loner. He doesn't exaggerate antler scores and truly feels regret when he finally tags the buck he's pursuing. Finding his next target buck might take years.

These hunters are extremely knowledgeable about whitetails and often eagerly share what they have learned. They don't expect others to adhere to their standards, but they expect all hunters to follow game laws and hunt ethically. The sport of deer hunting and whitetail deer mean more to them than any other folks you

will meet. They will probably even admit that they take deer hunting too seriously, or at least did for much of their life.

Some might mistakenly think that these hunters are ego-driven. Nothing could be further from the truth. Fragile egos cannot face unfilled tags or explaining those unfilled tags to friends and co-workers. These hunters clearly have their egos in check and are instead driven by the challenge and a degree of passion most hunters will never comprehend.

My good friend Joe Lieb from Iowa is featured in my new book, *Real World Whitetail Icons*, and is a perfect example of the kind of hunter I'm describing. Joe shot his last buck in 2002, and the last buck he took before that came in 1998. That's right. Joe has gone 10 years without killing a buck and went four years between that buck and the previous deer. Both of those bucks qualify for the Boone & Crockett record book. How many hunters can say that about the previous two bucks they shot?

During the past 15 hunting seasons, Joe has shot two bucks, but I assure you, during those other 13 seasons, he could have amassed a trophy room that would blow away that of most serious whitetail hunters. Joe has taken whitetail hunting to a level few will ever experience. He doesn't have to prove anything to anyone, nor does he have to pacify his ego. He has reached a specific level as a hunter and refuses to go backward, no matter how many seasons he must experience before filling his next buck tag.

### THE PATH REQUIRED

I have introduced you to and dissected the psyche of this rare group of hunters for a couple of reasons. First, many do not know or believe such folks exist. Rest assured, they do. Just because you don't know one doesn't mean they aren't there. My best guess is that fewer than one in 25,000 deer hunters are in that group. Like I stated earlier, you probably don't know one.

My primary goal is to offer insight into a level of trophy whitetail hunting for which you might wish to strive. Many of today's deer hunters have actually mastered trophy hunting for mature bucks. Although they have found the recipe for success,



tagging one mature buck after another will eventually get old. When that happens, there is no reason to give up the sport. You can still raise the bar to another level.

I don't think it's even possible for most hunters to reach that level as a hunter, because it requires such a rare personality and mindset. It starts with an extreme passion for whitetails. I know many deer hunters who actually have that passion for the sport and whitetails. That rare degree of passion might be the first prerequisite, but it's not what holds back most from reaching that rare level. That passion must be mixed with the right personality.

Reaching that level requires someone driven to succeed by something within them that won't accept excuses or compromised goals. When a deer hunter is on that path, they won't accept a 140-inch buck if their goal is a 150-incher, even if it's the last day of the season. Compromise means failure, and they would rather go three years without tagging a buck than to go back on their goal. That's what keeps most really good trophy hunters from reaching the level I'm talking about. If a hunter can't handle at least three or more consecutive years of not tagging a buck, they have no hope of reaching this elite level as a deer hunter. Unfilled tags fuel elite hunters, and compromise constitutes failure.

I hope some young hunters reading aspire to be the best whitetail hunters possible. I want them to know that unfilled tags and fruitless seasons are part of the price and not something to be ashamed of. The quest will take decades and never ends. When you reach one goal, you raise the bar. Each time you raise the bar, it takes even longer to clear it. No one will understand your journey or what drives you. Few will appreciate your sacrifice. Many will not believe your stories. You will know in your heart, however. You will know that you have seen things few other deer hunters ever will. You will experience a degree of satisfaction that can only be felt when you pay your dues through decades, do everything right and after several consecutive years of not filling a tag, have a mature monster buck walk past your stand while doing what big bucks do when

they think nobody is watching — as your bow remains on its hook. Then you will know. You will know you have reached a level few can comprehend. Fame will not come calling. Magazine articles and television appearances will not result, but you will know. You will know you have reached a level as a deer hunter that not one in 10,000 can comprehend. Hopefully, the next buck that comes along will be one that meets your goal. If your arrow flies true, you will feel a degree of satisfaction not known to most deer

hunters — and then must decide how much higher to raise the bar.

*Editor's note: Don Higgins can be reached through his website, [www.higginsoutdoors.com](http://www.higginsoutdoors.com), where you can find details regarding his books and consulting services.*



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# STRUCTURE YOUR HUNT

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**T**he success of so many strategies is tied to how well one knows deer behavior. The more you know, the better your chances of structuring and executing a successful hunt.

Fifty years ago, there were few if any forms of media to unravel the mysteries of deer behavior. In fact, until the early 1980s, the only way one could observe deer behavior was the old-fashioned way, which was in

the field. In most cases this required years of study. This is obviously no longer the case. Now there are many thousands of videos that enable hunters to shorten the learning curve.

However, in spite of all the whitetail behavior related items on the market, many hunters still try to take short cuts or force the issue when it comes to outsmarting a buck. Doing so seldom works. One of the biggest mistakes hunters make is trying to overcome what I call ill-wind.

## **WORK THE WIND, BEAT A BUCK**

“Scent is the most important sense tied to memory.” In so many cases a successful hunt boils down to how well a hunter understands the wind and how to work at keeping a whitetail from smelling him. If you don’t have the wind in your favor, you are doomed.

A whitetail truly lives and dies by his or her nose. Their ability to detect predators is legendary. Whether a whitetail’s sense of smell is a hundred or a thousand



times better than man's may be debatable, but the reality is that they can smell danger far better than we can imagine. We've done many interesting studies at our whitetail research facility over the years. One that was discovered by accident dealt with the distance at which deer can pick up odors.

I noticed this first-hand in the 1990s while doing research at my New York deer facility. The southern boundary of our 35-acre enclosure is 425 yards from the nearest woods. During the rut when there is a wind out of the south and does are coming in or in estrus, our bucks would pace or stand next to the southern fence line, staring in the direction of the hillside, raising their noses to pick up scent. Because there was only open space between the fence and the woods we knew that whitetails could detect odors from at least 425 yards away. Having observed this, I adopted the belief that deer probably can smell odors at far greater distances. So, to consistently kill whitetails it is critical that hunters understand how air moves.

## TRACKING AIR

For the most part thermals are characteristic of how air moves early and late in the day when there is virtually no wind. Typically a calm, cool, sunny morning will cause air to move up a hillside once the sun rises and begins warming the air.

The reverse can take place at the end of the day. On warm sunny days, as the sun inches toward the horizon, cool air will begin dropping back down a hillside. Of course the least little breeze will cause thermals to eddy back and forth, creating yet another obstacle for the hunter. Eddying thermals can be quite common in thick conifer forests or in early season hunting situations, before leaf-off.

What's more, steady wind movement can be both good and bad; it all depends on one's hunting location. For the hunter who hunts in flat country or on ridge tops a steady breeze generally moves consistently in the same direction, without eddying. For this reason such locations will almost always

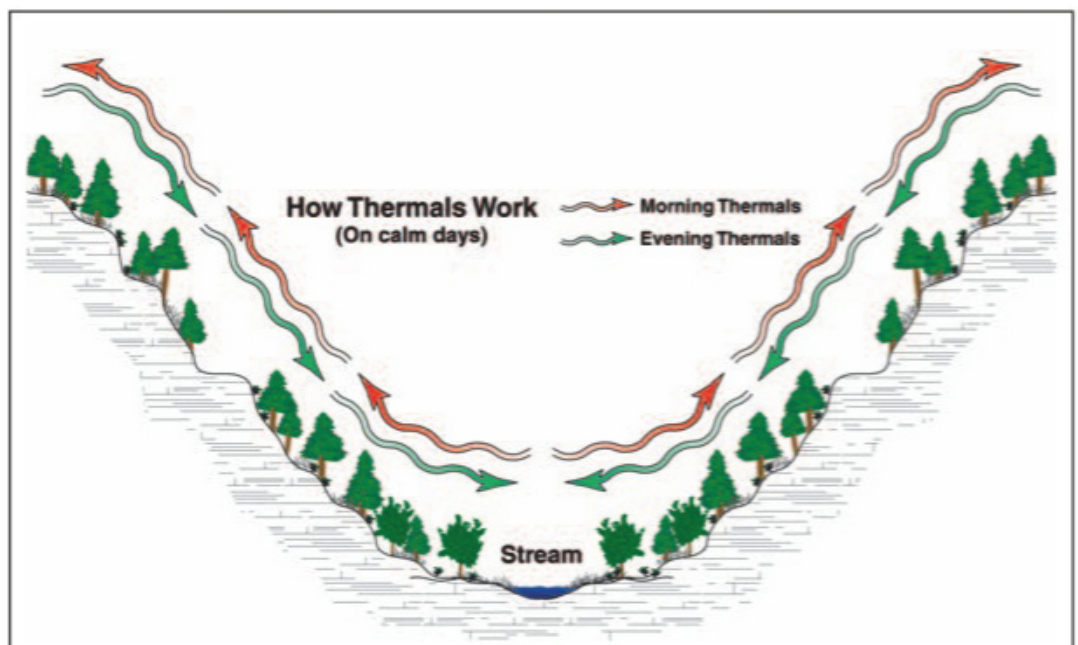
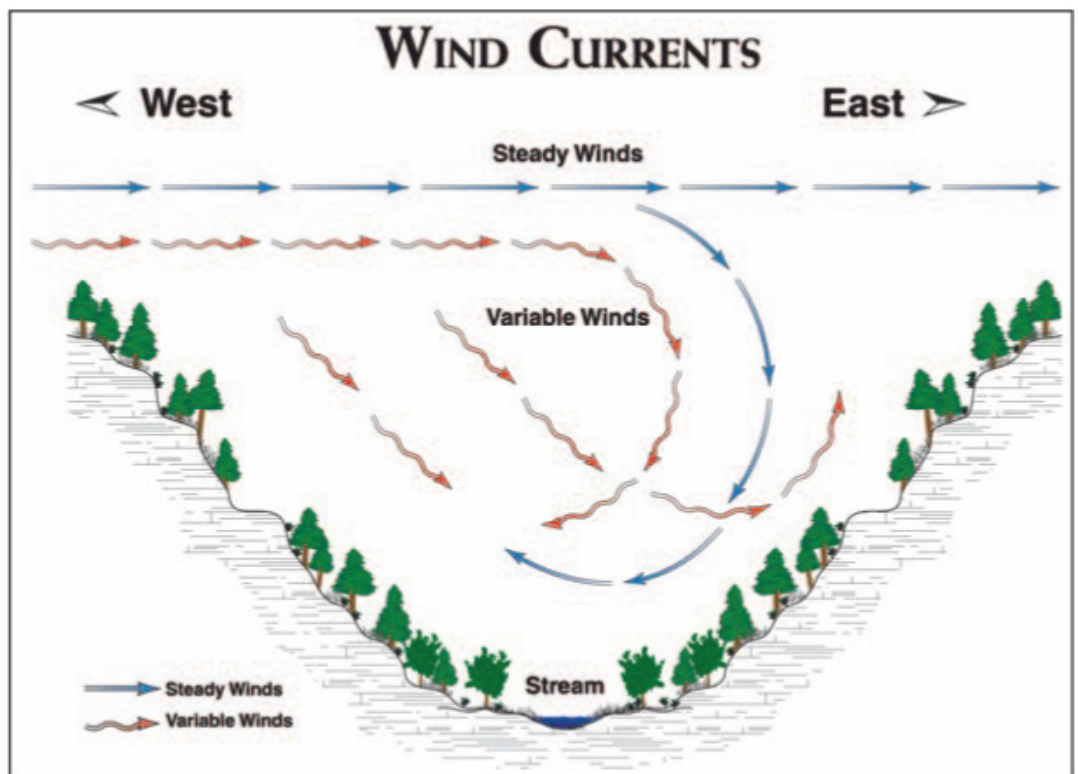
be the best ambush points to hunt when the wind kicks up.

Attempting to hunt on a hillside or in the bottom of a ravine or valley is usually futile when the wind is blowing. This is because as wind passes over a sudden drop in elevation it tends to swirl throughout the lower terrain (ravine or valley). Unfortunately hunters all too often think they might get lucky and catch the wind right when the buck comes by. Think again. Remember the description of how far deer can smell and learn it well. Nine times out of 10 you will not succeed trying to play this game. Deer remember very well. That's why they survive the way they do.

Of all wind conditions, gusty winds are the worst for a stand hunter. Little good can come from

gusty wind conditions because they tend to create the ultimate eddying effect. This is particularly the case when wind velocities of over 10 mph are broken with brief intervals of calm or decreased wind velocities. When this occurs, scent blows in every direction.

Humidity also determines how well a deer can smell. If you've ever observed a whitetail up close you will notice that they are continually moistening their noses with their tongues. They do this partly to keep their noses and nostrils moist so scent can be detected more easily. Consequently on damp days (when the humidity is higher) deer will be able to smell better.











# HUNTING LAND: WHY IT'S ONLY AS GOOD AS YOU MAKE IT

**BEFORE YOU START SPENDING MONEY AND MAKING CHANGES TO YOUR PROPERTY, SET DEFINED GOALS, AND CONSULT A BIOLOGIST.**

**A** slow walk down the dew-covered trail at dawn renews your spirit. It's deer season, but you have no intentions of shooting anything. Maybe you'll check some trail cameras or just lean up against a tree and watch deer funnel back through to their bedding areas. There are no worries of disturbing other hunters. You have finally achieved every serious deer hunter's dream: having your own piece of ground.





The closing signatures have been put on paper, and the land is under your control. You think the toughest task is done and you're ready to start managing for better deer hunting, but what's next?

One of the most common mistakes new landowners make is to start throwing money into the land or make drastic harvest

decisions before developing an appropriate management plan, which could save thousands — yes, thousands — of dollars and be the difference between just having land and the big-buck paradise of which you dreamed.

#### WHAT DO YOU WANT?

One of the hardest tasks facing a

landowner is determining the goals for his property. Do you want big bucks or a healthy and balanced herd? Often, clients I've worked with define several property goals, from creating a healthy, balanced herd with emphasis on big bucks to increasing the quality of hunting for their family. Aren't they very similar? Not necessarily. For example, when creating a better deer hunting experience for family, I focus on pushing the deer herd size to carrying capacity or the maximum before it begins negatively affecting the habitat. This is often the goal of many state agencies. Conversely, when creating a balanced, healthy herd with an emphasis on mature bucks, I seek a very close buck-to-doe ratio, and attempt to keep herd numbers lower so there is more food and space per deer. This can lead to better nutrition and bigger antlers.

No one knows what you want better than you. Don't be afraid to play with combinations of goals. You can grow big deer on your property while maximizing

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recreational opportunities for your family by focusing on shooting does and protecting younger bucks. You will start to see more mature bucks with larger antlers.

### HOW DO I KNOW I CAN REACH MY GOALS?

Well, that's simple. You don't. Deer management is a science, but it's just as much an art. It doesn't have any blueprints or basic instructions. What might work on your neighbor's property could be a complete failure on yours. Food plots are a great example. Just because your neighbor plants a successful alfalfa plot does not mean you will, too. Soils vary between properties and also within properties based on several factors, including topography and previous land practices. Your neighbor might have treated his plot with lime for several years to neutralize the soil pH, or the area in which he planted might just feature great soil.

Likewise, you must consider what type of hunting or management your neighbors are doing, particularly if you own less than 500 acres. One of the most common questions I get is, "Can I grow big bucks on my (less than 500) acres?" My answer is always, "It depends."

There are many factors at play, including your perception of a "big buck." I've worked with clients who have one mature buck using their 700 acres, but other clients with just more than 100 acres have seen five mature bucks on their land. I've never worked on a property I didn't think had potential to produce a mature buck. If you're looking strictly for Booners, that's a different story, but most properties almost always provide the possibility to produce and harvest a mature whitetail. It just takes patience, hard work and guidance from someone who has the knowledge to assist you.

### WHO CAN HELP ME?

There are several directions you can go. The most important thing to realize is that you're the customer, whether you have a federal, state or private biologist come to your property. They work for you, so

make sure you let them know what your specific goals are. Otherwise, you might end up wasting a lot of time. To help you figure out which entity is best for you and your property, let's look at each option in detail.

### FEDERAL BIOLOGISTS

Several federal government agencies employ wildlife biologists. The most popular are the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Natural Resource Conservation Service.

A federal biologist can be extremely helpful to private landowners. Several federal incentive programs can be applied to properties. They create and protect valuable habitat and also provide financial incentives to landowners. However, in recent years, these programs have had money issues, and qualifying has become more difficult.

Federal agencies are also more concerned with threatened and endangered species or upland birds



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and waterfowl rather than deer. If your property goals are heavily focused on whitetails, solely using a federal biologist is likely not the right route. However, I encourage you to consider some of the federal programs they offer. Many, although not focused on deer, can provide excellent habitat for whitetails.

#### STATE BIOLOGISTS

State biologists have the responsibility of managing the whitetail herd. Many states offer assistance to private landowners on habitat or herd management, including deer management assistance programs.

I've worked with several state agencies, and although it might be hard to believe, most biologists are just like you. They have a passion for hunting and the outdoors. Because they work for a free service, state biologists are typically "stretched thin," particularly in the current economy. However, they can still provide great information to private landowners. It just isn't possible for two to four biologists to cover the entire state and still dedicate adequate time to each landowner. This is especially true for states that only have one or two deer biologists who assume more administrative roles.

Although I'm not a state biologist, I try to remind hunters that these biologists are responsible for the entire state's deer herd. If you're looking for them to make a regulation or management change, you're barking up the wrong tree. Although rule changes are often recommended by biologists, a commission or commissioner often makes the final ruling. If you truly believe that something needs to



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change, attend a public commission meeting and voice your concern. Deer hunting is very emotional, but hunters often let emotions get the better of them, and their true message is never delivered.

The bottom line is state agencies can be a big help to private landowners by providing technical assistance. If you're looking for some basic food plot ideas, reach out to a biologist. But if you're looking to have a biologist help throughout the year, you might want to look in a different direction. If you are curious about what your

state provides, call your local office and ask. The worst they can say is no, and you move on.

### PRIVATE BIOLOGISTS

If you're paying attention to these groups, you'll notice all have "biologist" in the title. Although this group is often termed "consultants," there is a huge difference between a consultant and a biologist. Sadly, many people in the private sector give this group a bad reputation. If you Google "wildlife consultant," you will find thousands of

options. What's the difference, and who's right for you?

The main difference between private biologists and consultants is education. Often, someone with farming experience will go into the wildlife consulting business, and although they might know crops, they likely know very little about proper herd or hunter management. A private biologist is educated to manage all aspects of wildlife, including the three H's: herd, habitat and hunting. I always tell potential clients, "Even if you don't decide to work with me, I recommend hiring a biologist and not a consultant, and I'd be happy to give my opinion on your candidate."

Most wildlife biologists have at least one degree in a wildlife-related field (a bachelor's degree) and typically a master's degree. Don't be afraid to ask a biologist for his credentials. Any real biologist will be proud to tell you where they spent six-plus years in the university system. The only downfall of private biologists is they don't offer a free service. But in return, you will be given much more attention than you'll receive from state or federal biologists.

### CONCLUSION

Now that you know buying property is only the start, you can begin planning your next move. Having your own piece of ground is a satisfying feeling, but it's up to you to make it what you want. Have fun, and enjoy managing your property to its greatest potential.

— Jeremy Flinn is a registered private wildlife biologist from Missouri. He has worked with clients across North America producing better deer herds and habitat. He's also an expert contributor on D&DH TV. He currently is the Midwest regional wildlife biologist for Cabela's and an owner of The Buck Advisors ([www.buckadvisor.com](http://www.buckadvisor.com)).

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# LIFE-CHANGING BUCKS



**KILLING A MONSTER BUCK IS NOT ONLY EXHILARATING, IT CAN OPEN HUGE DOORS FOR HUNTERS. BUT THESE OPPORTUNITIES CAN COME AT A PRICE.**

**T**he sound of a grunting buck chasing does through the dry leaves in the thicket in front of my stand gave me high hopes for the evening hunt. It was still two hours before dark, and my stand guarded the most likely exit route from the thicket as deer bedded there would surely make their way toward the ag fields behind me as evening drew near. I suspected the buck was a youngster due to the fact that it was still a full two hours before dark on a warm sunny day, and the rut was not yet on in full force.



Soon a band of does and fawns exited the thicket and slowly made their way toward my stand. I stared intently down the path the deer had used, expecting to see a young buck follow them. What happened next is a sight I will never forget. Out from the thicket stepped the biggest wild buck I had ever seen. His rack had more points than I could count. The majestic buck stood right at the edge of the thicket just 30 yards away and intently watched the does feeding below my stand. I was sure the does would soon feed past my perch and into the field behind me, and when they did, the buck would soon follow and give me a shot.

It was not to be, however, as the does and fawns soon turned and walked right back into the thicket from which they came, taking the buck with them. Many bowhunters would have been heartbroken, but I was ecstatic! I had just seen the biggest buck of my life and was determined to get a shot at him. Right then and there I vowed to save my last buck tag for this brute.

This was the first time I had ever focused on killing a specific buck, but this buck was certainly

worth the challenge. I just couldn't imagine ending my season by killing a different buck.

### THE CHASE IS ON

Over the next few weeks, I would have three more encounters with this buck before finally getting an ethical shot and ultimately killing him. In the end, those four encounters came from four different treestands and gave me my best buck to date, officially scoring 214 7/8 inches. This hunt took place back in 2004 and changed me as a hunter while also opening doors for me in the hunting industry.

The idea of targeting one specific buck was not something that I had on my radar back then. You have to realize that this was a different era. Game cameras were new and very inefficient. They all used 35mm film cameras, so they were limited to 36 photos before the film had to be changed out. The motion sensors on the cameras were very poor by today's standards. When I killed that buck, I owned just one game camera and did not know of another hunter who had one. Getting a single photo of a mature buck was a real accomplishment at

that time, but over the next several years, technology like digital cameras advanced the reliability of game cameras to a new level.

After shooting that 214-inch buck back in 2004, I immediately changed my hunting approach and have targeted individual bucks every season since. Twice I killed mature target bucks on the very first morning I hunted for them. That 2004 buck gave me the confidence to take my deer hunting to a new level as I proved to myself that hunting specific bucks was not a recipe for failure but was indeed possible.

### OPENING DOORS

There was something else that my 2004 buck did for me that I wasn't expecting. It opened doors for me. I was already a budding outdoor writer, but the interest in my articles exploded after this buck hit the ground. He seemed to validate the information I was sharing, and all of a sudden I found it a lot easier to get articles published and started getting correspondence from readers who enjoyed my work. Again, this was a different era, so don't expect that killing a big buck today is going to get you the same result. I promise you, it won't!

Soon after shooting that 214-inch buck, I set a goal for myself to kill another 200+-inch buck, but the next time I would do it on video. That journey would take 13 years to accomplish, but during the 2017 season, I shot a buck that I had named Smokey who scored 206 inches. This situation was very unique as I knew Smokey very well and had watched him mature over a period of five years. During the 2016 season, I passed this buck five times and captured all of them on video. That season, Smokey scored 186 inches, and the videos of me passing this giant buck were a hit on the internet.

During the summer of 2017, I started getting photos of Smokey and saw that he would likely top the coveted 200-inch mark. I went on several different podcasts before the season opened and boldly predicted that I was going to kill this buck months before actually doing it. When it all came together on that fateful October evening, a lot of attention came my way.

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*When the author started getting photos of the two bucks he named Smokey and Trump in the summer of 2017 he knew that it could be a very special hunting season. Little did he know that he would kill both bucks on back-to-back hunts in mid-October. The impact that this had on his whitetail consulting business is still being felt today.*

Putting my tag on Smokey was a dream come true, but I couldn't have predicted what would happen next. On the very next hunt, I shot a 193-inch buck that I had named Trump! On back-to-back hunts, I shot two bucks whose total antler score was over 400 inches.

### THE REAL REWARD

This is probably a good point for me to stress that I don't hunt big mature bucks for the financial or social aspect that sometimes comes from doing so successfully. Chasing giant mature bucks is my life's passion, and I would be doing it even if nobody ever knew of my success and there was no other reward. It is the challenge of matching wits with the toughest deer in the woods that drives me. Still, some bucks can be life-changers.

Today, a lot of deer hunters set out targeting a specific buck. As previously mentioned, game cameras have not only shown us what is lurking about our hunting areas, but they have also helped us become more successful. I firmly believe that game cameras are the biggest game-changer I have seen in my 40 years in the deer woods. I have even gone so far as to say that they have actually made killing mature bucks almost easy.

Matching wits with one individual mature buck is deer hunting's ultimate challenge, and with every passing season, more and more hunters are stepping up to the plate and accepting it. This fall, I went to see a buck that my friend Kyle Heuerman shot after chasing it for four seasons. The conversation we had while staring at his trophy revealed to me that the feelings I have felt after killing a buck

that I had targeted and finally killed were not unique to me only.

When a deer hunter sets out to kill any buck of a certain age or score, there is always a feeling of joy, elation and happiness when he achieves his goal. However, when a hunter has targeted one specific buck, he feels those same feelings and several others as well. There is a genuine sadness that the hunt is now over. That buck will no longer constantly be in the hunter's thoughts. For a while, there will be an emptiness that other deer hunters do not experience.

### WHAT'S REALLY IMPORTANT

There will also sometimes be questions that a successful hunter asks himself after killing his target buck. Was killing this one buck worth the sacrifices made in other areas of one's life? I know all too well the sacrifice in time that it takes to hunt specific mature bucks. We are each allotted 24 hours in a day, so the time we spend chasing giants is time that could have been spent doing other things ... like spent with family.

Deer hunters in particular and mature buck hunters specifically, are very passionate. That passion drives us to succeed and sometimes gives us tunnel vision with regards to our priorities. Many deer hunters have sacrificed marriages, good jobs and loads of cash in pursuit of their passion. At some point, many of us will question if it was worth it.

As I stood there with my friend Kyle admiring his hard-earned trophy, our conversation revealed to me that he "got it" much sooner in life than I did. Kyle is roughly 25 years younger than me and openly questioned if

the last four years of chasing this one buck was worth the cost. During that period, Kyle and his wife, Jen, became parents to two daughters, each of which was born premature and spent extra time in the hospital. In fact, his youngest daughter, Kimber, was born just 20 days before Kyle killed this buck and had just gotten home from the hospital a few days before. Family members were pitching in to help Kyle and Jen so that Kyle could be in the woods during the rut chasing his target buck. Once it was all over, Kyle was left to do some soul searching. Was this buck really worth it?

They say that antlers are to men what diamonds are to women. Each is unique and the bigger the better. I have spent a lifetime chasing giant bucks with a passion that few can comprehend. It is a fire that continues to burn hotter with each passing season and even in the off-season never wanes. As I look back on a hunting career that now spans over 40 years, my biggest regret is that when my own two daughters were still kids, I didn't give up a few deer hunts each season to spend more time with them. It is a missed opportunity that I will never get back ... and neither will they.

My advice to young hunters like Kyle is to get your priorities in order now while your kids are still young. Deer hunting and giant bucks will always be there; your babies won't.

— Don Higgins can be reached through his website [www.higginsoutdoors.com](http://www.higginsoutdoors.com).







ETHAN FAMILY PHOTO

# THE FAMILY AFFAIR BUCK

**WITH THE SUPPORT OF HIS FAMILY, A YOUNG HUNTER PURSUES AN UNFORGETTABLE WISCONSIN BUCK.**

**E**than Hurlburt of Durand, Wisconsin, has squeezed a lot into his young life. At 13 years of age, he has already taken a 10-point, an 8-point and a 12-point with split brow tines in previous Wisconsin firearm seasons. “Busy” best describes the nine-member Hurlburt household. Ethan is the third of five kids. None have yet graduated from high school, and his mother is a substitute science teacher. The family also fosters two kids. For Ethan, deer hunting time is not easy to find when his after-school hours occupy him as a running back on his middle school football team. Even that’s a challenge because his dad farms 5,000 Buffalo County acres full of beef cattle, crops and mixed hardwoods. Hard work fills almost every daylight hour, especially from September to January.

## TARGET BUCK

The whitetail bucks Ethan has already taken on the farm are a mark of success, and this summer, he used seven trail cameras to follow a 9-point, a 10-point, a 12-point and a 14-point. The 14-point has an extra beam, possibly caused by a broken skull. But then when you get a big

16-point nontypical on camera, one that will score somewhere in the 190-inch range, you think more about putting him on your wall than any of the others. Most photos of him were blurry because he was always moving, but a couple of nice, sharp photos of the buck in velvet antlers planted it firmly in Ethan’s dreams.

“It’s the biggest buck we’ve ever seen on the farm,” Ethan said. “I showed a trail camera photo of the buck to a couple of friends of mine and told them that was the buck I wanted. They thought I was insane — until I told them I got it.”

Ethan’s dad didn’t think he was insane. “Dad really wanted me to get that buck, and that was a real encouragement.”

Fortunately, the Durand middle school respects the busy lives of people in a community of churchgoers and doesn’t schedule sports practices and other activities on Wednesdays, so kids can participate in midweek confirmation class.

## THE HUNT

On Sept. 18, Ethan’s confirmation class didn’t meet, so he took advantage of that free time. He stepped off the school bus at 4 o’clock, swapped his

## BUCK SHOTS

STEVE SORENSEN

school clothes for camo, and grabbed his crossbow. He and his dad headed out to a treestand he hung 20 feet high and about 50 feet inside the woods near a man-made stock pond, a small food plot and a standing cornfield. The plan was to hunt from 4:30 until dark.

A couple of problems had the potential to frustrate that plan. First, it was a hot day which would limit deer movement before dark. On top of that, the buck hadn’t shown up on Ethan’s trail cameras for a week. The buck had a habit of disappearing for stretches, and Ethan worried this was going to be one of those stretches.

The farm is about half cropland and pasture, and the rest is a hardwood forest of black walnut, oak and poplar, with some birch and pine mixed in. Plenty of thick cover offers bucks lots of secluded places where they can get old. It doesn’t take them long to learn to hide, so there’s no better time to get one of those bucks than the early season. Ethan proved that a few days into the Wisconsin archery season.

“It was still hot when we got to my stand, but about an hour later, five bucks and two does came by for a drink at the pond before heading to the cornfield. I wanted the big one, so I waited.” At 7:10, the big one came out, and Ethan got ready for the shot.

He was more nervous than he let on, but it didn’t show outwardly, and his dad thought he was amazingly calm. Ethan squeezed the trigger at 20–25 yards and hit both lungs. Judging by the buck’s reaction, his dad was sure it was a good hit. They found plenty of blood, recovered the arrow, and followed up immediately. The buck didn’t go more than 100 yards.

The buck field-dressed at 202 pounds, and the antlers were given a green gross score of 193 inches.

— *Have a big-buck story you’d like to share? Email us at: [chris.berens@media360LLC.com](mailto:chris.berens@media360LLC.com).*









## 12

VITAL ROLES  
OF DEER  
HUNTERS

**HUNTER CONTRIBUTIONS IN MONEY, TIME AND ADVOCACY ARE THE VERY FOUNDATION OF SUCCESSFUL WILDLIFE CONSERVATION, ALTHOUGH WRITING ABOUT THIS IN HUNTING MAGAZINES IS SOMETIMES CONSIDERED “PREACHING TO THE CHOIR.” TROUBLE IS, THE CHOIR ISN’T ALWAYS PAYING ATTENTION TO THE SERMON.**

**H**unters have voluntarily and willingly contributed billions of dollars to support conservation for all wildlife species, not just those that are hunted. They have been the central pillars of conservation and thus are responsible for supporting a wide variety of conservation activities that everyone values.

Nearly everyone enjoys wildlife, but most people are not aware of the contributions made by hunters, trappers, anglers and recreational shooters to support sustainable conservation. Although hunters know that their financial contributions from licenses and equipment help pay for wildlife management, many do not always fully appreciate how vital they are in the bigger picture.

It is valuable to review the roles of hunters in our fantastic system of conservation, so we all can fully appreciate and help spread the word. Here are 12 categories that all hunters help us manage.

### 1. WILDLIFE POPULATION MANAGEMENT

Hunters are the most effective and efficient way to maintain wildlife populations within the capacity of what the habitat can support to reduce population die-offs, provide for more productive populations, protect habitat, reduce the spread of disease, or to reduce conflicts with humans. In cases where population reduction is the management goal, managers must harvest more animals than the population can replace through reproduction.

Population management is just one example of hunters working as partners in wildlife management. Wildlife populations are sometimes managed below the biological limit of the habitat because of conflicts with

humans such as vehicle collisions, nuisance wildlife, livestock depredation, interfering with agricultural production and concerns for human and domestic animal health or safety.

For many years, hunting and trapping were partially justified as necessary management actions to save animals from a lingering death by starvation. That is certainly true in many cases, but also not true in many more. There are many examples of species that will not overpopulate their habitat if we stop hunting them.

The truth is more complicated than the simplistic idea of wildlife overpopulation. In reality, the importance of hunting to conservation in the broad sense is not tied simply to population control. It's important to understand that a simple deer season or duck season might seem like an isolated activity, but it is merely a component — a critical one — of a much larger wildlife conservation model. Game populations are renewable natural resources that literally pay the bills for a far-reaching, comprehensive system of sustainable wildlife conservation that has proven itself superior to any other model.

### 2. THE TRUE CONSERVATIONISTS

We frequently hear that hunters pay for conservation, but what does that mean? Millions of dollars each year are hunter-generated for the direct conservation of



wildlife and their habitats. During 2016, \$695 million was apportioned to state wildlife agencies in the United States from the excise tax collected on hunting and shooting purchases (Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Funds, also known as the Pittman-Robertson Act). The sale of hunting and trapping licenses (>\$600 million) and private donations by hunters for conservation efforts (>\$300 million) also contribute, bringing the total to more than \$1.6 billion per year. There are about 13.7 million hunters in the United States alone, and their annual expenditures provide significant support to rural communities in the United States, Mexico and Canada.

Overall, hunting and trapping voluntarily redistribute wealth from urban centers to smaller rural communities, where it is multiplied through the local economy. Economic multipliers are commonly used to estimate this compounding ripple effect. In 2011, it was estimated that \$33.7 billion spent in America had an economic impact of \$66.7 billion, supporting almost 660,000 jobs in the United States.

### 3. WILDLIFE LAW ENFORCEMENT

Hunters, trappers and anglers have helped create and maintain an army of law enforcement officers to uphold the massive amount of legal restrictions to wildlife harvest. Regulated hunting is only regulated if the laws are obeyed. Currently, more than 8,100 wildlife conservation law enforcement officers are actively working in the United States, and most are paid with income from the sale of hunting, trapping and fishing licenses.

Besides policing hunters and anglers, they also perform duties related to water quality, habitat protection, public safety, search and rescue, littering, vandalism, trade in threatened and endangered species, and providing backup to other local law enforcement agencies.

Opponents of hunting rarely offer alternatives for funding trained officers to protect wildlife against exploitation. If hunting were made illegal in North America, we would immediately lose this massive protection force and fall into the unregulated market hunting that was common before hunting was institutionalized as the foundation of conservation.

### 4. WILDLIFE RESTORATION

The restoration of wildlife populations across North America is the greatest wildlife success story in the history of conservation anywhere. We have restored nearly all of the populations that were overexploited before the development and implementation of our current system of conservation.

Species such as Canada geese, wood ducks, white-tailed deer, pronghorns, bighorn sheep and wild turkeys all represent important species whose restoration was driven by hunters who could not bear the thought of a landscape without them. North America has a nearly full complement of native wildlife living in habitat that has changed remarkably little during the past 300 years, compared to other continents.

Restoration of large mammal populations continues

The advertisement features a close-up of a deer's head with large antlers, resting on a bed of autumn leaves. A black spray bottle with a yellow label and a deer head logo is positioned in the lower left foreground. The background is a dark, wooded area. The text is overlaid on the right side of the image.

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today, with many big game animals still being successfully translocated into historical ranges for the enjoyment of all residents.

### 5. MONITORING WILDLIFE POPULATIONS

Monitoring wildlife populations and accumulating baseline trend data are the basis of well-informed, science-informed decisions that are foundational to our model of wildlife conservation. Hunted species are not the only ones monitored, but they generally do receive the most attention. State, provincial and federal agencies have a history of monitoring wildlife populations, beginning at the very genesis of wildlife conservation in North America. Many agencies have examples of monitoring programs that have remained relatively consistent for decades and provide valuable trend data.

### 6. PROVIDING WILDLIFE HABITAT

Land management agencies manage wildlife habitat on millions of acres of federal land. Many states and provinces have also purchased wildlife habitat with the proceeds from hunting licenses and taxes on hunting, fishing and shooting equipment. During a 12-year period (2000–2012) in the United States, \$308 million from Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds were available to states for the acquisition of more than 74 million acres of wildlife habitat. In addition, wildlife conservation organizations used private donations to purchase land or conservation easements on large tracts of wildlife habitat. Most of these areas are

purchased with game animals in mind, but wetlands acquired for waterfowl, forests purchased for deer or turkeys, mountainous areas protected for wild sheep, and grasslands restored for quail and pronghorns have benefited all non-game and endangered species that rely on those habitats.

### 7. RESEARCH SUPPORT

One of the foundations of our system of wildlife conservation is that management decisions are based in science. In the United States, about \$57 million was allocated in 2009 to state wildlife agencies from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program for conducting more than 10,000 wildlife research projects. During the early years of the wildlife management profession, money was spent exclusively on learning more about species that were at low levels. As more was learned about managing those species back to abundance, research focus shifted somewhat to all species and their habitats.

### 8. HELPING THOSE NOT HUNTED

A preponderance of hunter-generated money is still expended on the management and protection of hunted species. This is appropriate because populations of species that are being annually hunted generally require a greater intensity of monitoring, law enforcement, research and management. For those not fortunate enough to be hunted, other funding sources must be devised. Non-game activities are funded from different funding sources in different agencies, including income tax checkoffs, special stamps, independent grants, donations, lottery or gambling revenue, some sales tax, and hunters' dollars from the Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration Program. Millions of dollars are contributed annually by hunters through the Wildlife Restoration Program for the conservation of birds and mammals that are not hunted.

### 9. INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Communicating with the public and considering human dimensions in wildlife management have become vital to the effectiveness of management agencies. All wildlife agencies have some public information officers on staff to disseminate wildlife information and to inform stakeholders of agency activities through press releases, websites, social media, radio, television and a multitude of publications for diverse audiences. Some wildlife agencies use Federal Aid in Wildlife Restoration funds, but most simply use money garnered from the sale of hunting and fishing licenses. In this way, the entire public benefits from the information provided by funding generated from hunting.

### 10. POLITICAL INFLUENCE (THE GOOD KIND)

Early groups of organized hunters were instrumental in providing the political support needed to implement the laws that developed into the system of conservation we have today.

For example, Theodore Roosevelt organized the Boone and Crockett Club in 1887 by assembling most of the powerful conservation-minded people of the day;









*It's important to understand that a simple deer season might seem like an isolated activity, but it is merely a component – a critical one – of a much larger wildlife conservation model.*

WINDIGO IMAGES

many of them hunters, but all of them influential. When political influence threatens proper wildlife conservation efforts, sportsmen and women at the local and national levels have shown themselves willing and able to come together in support of wildlife and their habitat.

There are also many examples of wildlife agency funding sources coming under attack by politicians, only to have organized hunting groups step up to their defense.

### 11. CITIZEN SCIENCE

It has become popular to use the phrase “citizen science” to describe using the public to collect data and help with research or management. Those who think this is a new concept are unaware hunters were the original citizen scientists. Hunters have always been an important source of biological information for wildlife managers.

Harvest data such as the total number harvested, sex and age ratios, body weight or condition, harvest location and many other types of related information have been collected at check stations since the early years of wildlife management. Biological samples from harvested animals are used to determine prior disease exposure, parasite loads, nutritional status, genetic relationships or diversity and approximate age.

The collection of these types of samples is sometimes done by the hunters themselves and requires a high level of cooperation and commitment.

### 12. VOLUNTEERISM

Hunters individually, and the organizations to which they belong, have always been active in providing volunteer labor for habitat improvement projects, construction of nesting structures or boxes, altering fences to be wildlife friendly, teaching hunting and trapping education courses, wildlife surveys, working check stations, routine facility maintenance, cleaning up trash and many other beneficial activities. These volunteer efforts benefit wildlife directly and allow wildlife management agencies to stretch their conservation dollars further to accomplish additional goals.

### THE FUTURE OF CONSERVATION

The contributions of hunters and trappers to wildlife and habitat conservation is undeniable. These contributions have been steady and consistent through time, even as society has changed to be more urban and environmentally detached. With these trends not likely to change, and the proportion of hunters in the United States decreasing, we will undoubtedly see some challenges to our system of “conservation through consumption.”

Currently, regulated hunting enjoys a broad base of public support in North America. Several surveys have consistently reported that 75% to 81% of respondents support hunting and agree it should continue.

Trend data from surveys indicate there might be an increasing proportion of Americans who approve of legal fair-chase hunting when the harvest is utilized. But just because hunters had a lead role in the development of the most successful system of wildlife conservation, does not mean we own the future.

Those truly interested in perpetuating this proven conservation model will need to work to preserve it. Future efforts to conserve wildlife and wild places will not succeed without a broad base of public support.

Hunters must be recognized for their past, present and potential future contributions. Remaining a relevant force in conservation means we are not seen by the general public as degrading or obstructing wildlife conservation efforts. We must always be conscious of things that give all hunters a bad name, thereby eroding public confidence in a hunter-based system of conservation.

How hunters communicate their vital role in conservation to the non-hunting public will decide whether hunting will be supported far into the future.

*— Jim Heffelfinger is a certified wildlife biologist who has worked as a biologist for the federal government, state wildlife agencies, universities and in the private sector in Texas, New Mexico and Arizona.*





DR. JOE SEBRANEK

# Don't Worry

## ABOUT NITRITE OR NITRATE IN CURED VENISON

**MYTHS THAT NITRITE, NITRATE AND CURED MEAT ARE HAZARDOUS TO HUMAN HEALTH HAVE CIRCULATED FOR DECADES. HERE'S THE TRUTH.**

**O**ne of the best ways to utilize venison that is not used for steaks or roasts is for a variety of sausage products. Smoked sausage, summer sausage, snack sticks and jerky are some of the most popular choices, and local meat processors usually offer additional specialty products that they have developed. Many hunters choose to make their own sausage as well, and small-scale meat processing equipment and blends of spices with other ingredients have become widely available.



## USES AND MYTHS

In any case, the best approach is to choose meat products that are cured because this means that nitrite and perhaps nitrate will be among the ingredients used. Nitrite is a highly effective preservative that suppresses the development of rancid flavors, stabilizes meat color and acts as a strong inhibitor of bacteria. Cured sausage products will be safer and will have a much longer storage life than uncured sausage such as breakfast sausage. However, there is a very common perception among many

people that nitrite, nitrate and cured meat are hazardous to human health. This is a myth that has been circulated and recirculated since the 1970s and just doesn't go away. Fortunately, in the last 25 years or so, a very different story has been developing as a result of a great deal of research showing that nitrite and nitrate are positive contributors to human health and may even be necessary for good health. This side of the story has not received the degree of attention that it deserves.

## THE REAL STORY

To fully understand the controversies surrounding nitrite, nitrate and cured meat, let's start with a little history. It is clear that cured meats have been produced for centuries and predate written history. Speculation has it that the original preservation method for meat was probably addition of salt and, somewhere along the line, someone noticed that salt that was contaminated with saltpeter (potassium nitrate) was a more effective preservative than salt alone. Consequently, saltpeter and, later, nitrate became the common means by which meat was cured and preserved.

As science advanced, it was discovered in the 1890s that nitrate was converted to nitrite by bacteria in meat and that it was nitrite that was the active curing agent. The real breakthrough, with implications for the future, came in 1901 with a study that showed that nitrite created the properties that characterized cured meat, especially the color, by forming nitric oxide during the curing process. There were two very significant results of this. First, nitrite rather than nitrate became the ingredient of choice for meat curing, and second, the discovery of nitric oxide would prove to be a blockbuster discovery, but not until some 80 years later!

In the meantime, the events that led to the present-day concerns about nitrite, cured meat and human health began in the 1970s when it was discovered that nitrite could, in high concentrations, react with secondary amines in meat and other foods to form nitrosamines, which were already recognized as very potent carcinogens. Because nitrite was used for meat curing, this discovery, of course, stimulated a huge amount of research on the safety of cured meat.

Research by meat scientists demonstrated that reducing and controlling the amount of nitrite in cured meat mitigated the potential risk of nitrosamines, and the USDA modified some of the meat curing regulations, particularly for bacon, that helped to solve the problem. These changes have reduced the likelihood of nitrosamine formation in cured meat to near zero, and, in fact, cured meats are no longer even tested for the presence of these compounds,



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## RECIPE OF THE MONTH

By Dan Young

### Lip Smacking Deer Loins

#### INGREDIENTS:

- + Deer loin
- + smoked bacon
- + 1/2 cup brown sugar
- + 1 Tbsp cajun pepper
- + 1 Tbsp meat tenderizer
- + 1 Tbsp season salt
- + 1 Tbsp garlic powder
- + 1 Tbsp black pepper

#### DIRECTIONS:

Combine last 4 ingredients. Butterfly the loin lengthwise, leaving about 1/2-inch of base. Rub with seasoning mix and sprinkle with brown sugar and a touch of cajun pepper. Close the loin up and completely wrap it in bacon, leaving a small space between each strip. Secure with toothpicks. Pre-heat the oven to 350 degrees. Place the loin in a baking dish and cover tightly with foil. Bake about 1 hour, or until a thermometer registers 150 degrees. Remove from oven, let rest for 5 minutes then slice between the bacon strips.

so they are NOT a significant health risk in cured meat products.

#### THE EFFECT ON HUMAN HEALTH

Now for the exciting part of the story on human health. During the 1970s, when research on nitrite in meat curing was at its peak due to the concerns about nitrosamines, meat scientists were studying nitrite and nitrate following human consumption by comparing ingested with excreted amounts of nitrite and nitrate in human subjects, and it was discovered that we excrete significantly more than we consume. This was an “aha!” moment because it meant that the human body actually manufactures its own form of nitrite and nitrate.

Follow-up research determined that we have an enzyme system that produces nitric oxide, the same molecule that is responsible for cured meat. Because there is almost always a purpose for things that occur in nature, scientists began to study nitric oxide in human physiology and discovered that nitric oxide is a critical component for many biological processes including cardiovascular functions, blood pressure regulation, wound healing and even athletic performance.

The role of nitric oxide has been shown to be so important that the original team of scientists that reported many of these effects was awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology

or Medicine in 1998. Remember: The meat industry had first discovered nitric oxide as the active meat curing agent in 1901!

Nitric oxide has been shown to be especially important to cardiovascular health because nitric oxide relaxes and dilates blood vessels to result in reduced blood pressure. It has also been determined that as we grow older, our natural enzyme system produces less nitric oxide, which makes other means of blood pressure control more important. This is where dietary sources of nitrite and nitrate can be important because diet can provide a supplementary source of nitric oxide.

There are now numerous nutritional supplements available that provide nitrate, which will result in increased amounts of nitrite and nitric oxide in tissues and blood following consumption. Increasing the concentrations of nitrite in tissues and blood has been suggested as a means to not only reduce blood pressure but also to prevent or reduce the damage that can occur during heart attacks and strokes because of the improved dilation of blood vessels and increased blood flow.

The primary dietary source of nitrate found in human consumption (about 80%) is vegetables such as celery, spinach and several others. Some scientists have even suggested that the widely recognized positive

health effects of vegetables in the diet is due, at least in part, to the nitrate content of vegetables.

Other effects of dietary nitrate include improved wound healing due to increased blood flow and increased athletic performance due to increased blood flow through dilated blood vessels in muscles. Some Olympic-class athletes and major college athletic teams have been taking nitrate supplements because of the documented increase in endurance and efficiency of muscle functions during exercise. The importance of dietary nitrite and nitrate for human health has reached the point that some scientists have suggested (somewhat tongue-in-cheek) that they should be considered essential nutrients.

It is important to note that the positive effects of nitrite and nitrate have been demonstrated in documented clinical trials involving human subjects, so there can be little doubt about the observed results. On the other hand, the concerns about nitrite and nitrate in cured meat for human health have been the result of epidemiological studies, and these types of studies do not produce cause-and-effect results. Epidemiology depends on finding correlations between observations such as meat consumption and cancer incidence. It is important to remember that a correlation essentially means that two things happen at the same time but provides no evidence that one causes the other.

#### CONCLUSION

Long story short: Don't worry about using nitrite or nitrate in your venison sausage, providing you use the proper amount, or, for that matter, don't worry about consuming any other cured meat products that are available in the supermarkets. The latest evidence suggests that consumption of nitrite and nitrate may actually be good for you!

— Dr. Joe Sebranek is a distinguished professor of animal sciences, food science and human nutrition at Iowa State University.





# 15 THINGS YOU NEED FOR YOUR HOME WORKSHOP

KEEP YOUR DEER RIFLES CLEAN, AND THEY WILL PERFORM FOR MANY YEARS!



**Denatured alcohol** — An all-around safe and effective solution for cleaning oil and grease from gun metal.

**Firearm grease** — Often required for metal-to-metal friction surfaces. The authors' preference for triggers, bolt gun locking lugs, cocking ramps and low-speed precision parts is TW25B. For high-speed (gas gun) applications, Brownells Action Lube works well since it is a bit thicker and stickier.

**Gun oil** — A dedicated lubricant (not a CLP) is always advisable for short-term protection of gun metal, lubricating metal-to-metal friction surfaces with close tolerances and protecting barrel bores. Mineral oil is also a perfectly acceptable substitute for gun oil.

**RIG grease** — A long-term gun metal protectant — especially in barrel bores — for use when a firearm is stored unused for more than 30 days.

**Solvent** — Essential for removing lead, copper and gunpowder fouling. Hoppe's #9 is a standard for good reason ... it works. Birchwood-Casey's Bore Scrubber is another good solvent to use.

**Shop-grade paper towels** — They are inexpensive, rugged enough for gun work cleanup, and you'll want plenty on-hand.

**Swabs and cotton-tipped applicators** — Good for applying solutions to hard-to-reach areas and for removing excess solutions from your work piece.

## GUN SHOP

LOU PATRICK & ROB REASER

**Loctite** — The best way to keep screws and threaded joints from backing out. You'll use blue Loctite for most applications, but having a small quantity of red on-hand is always advisable.

**Penetrating lubricant** — Your best friend for helping to free up corroded screws or other threaded joints.

**WD-40** — Not to be used in place of lubricating oil, but ideal for removing moisture from out-of-the-way gun parts and for cleaning certain materials from gun metal.

**JB Weld** — Some consider it to be a miracle adhesive; some wouldn't consider it at all. The truth is, JB Weld finds many uses in firearm modification projects, so it's a good idea to have some around.

**Birchwood Casey Tru-Oil** — A must-have sealant for wooden stocks. Sealing the open grain of wood stocks beneath the butt pad and inside all inletting prevents moisture from expanding, warping or otherwise damaging hardwood stocks.

**Birchwood Casey Gun Stock Wax** — Protects a wood stock's finish and repels water.

**Cold bluing** — Scratches are an inevitable fact unless you treat your guns like museum pieces. A cold blue (Traditions Firearms) can be applied to raw metal to provide rust protection and hide small blemishes.

**Armor All** — All rubber eventually hardens, cracks and ultimately fails. Applying Armor All to rubber butt pads will help keep in the oils and preserve the rubber's pliancy.





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INFO: [WWW.BOHNING.COM](http://WWW.BOHNING.COM)



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BaseMap is a mapping app and multi-faceted tool for people who love the outdoors. Simply turn on a unit layer for whatever state and species you are interested in hunting and have instant access to detailed season dates and past season harvest data, and view detailed landowner information including clear boundaries, owner name, parcel size and more. Know exactly where private land stops and public land begins. You can also mark exact locations of your trail cameras, treestands and more. The app's Habitat Range layers will show you exactly where your quarry lives in the unit you are hunting. Other options include layers for wildfires and timber cuts. MSRP: Basic membership—free; Pro—\$4.99/month or \$29.99/year; Hunt Research—\$9.99/year.

INFO: [WWW.BASEMAP.COM](http://WWW.BASEMAP.COM)



## 3 TRIJICON VENTUS

Powered by WindPro Technology™, the Trijicon Ventus™ is designed with a Doppler LIDAR engine that can measure headwind, tailwind, crosswind and vertical wind components at six different distances in front of the user in any weather condition. The Ventus comes in two models: Ventus and Ventus X. In addition to the downrange wind and extreme ranging performance of the Ventus, the Ventus X adds a state-of-the-art ballistics solver. An onboard sensor suite captures all necessary data to provide improved first-round-hit probability to hunters. The Ventus X also communicates via Bluetooth to the advanced Trijicon Ballistic application. The app provides the user with expanded capability such as geo-location, wind maps, range tables, and reticle holdover views. Other features include a collimated fiber-optic laser capable of up to 5,000-yard returns through dust, fog, sleet and snow; 9x optical magnification and center cross-dot reticle for target acquisition at extended ranges. MSRP: Not yet available.

INFO: [WWW.TRIJICON.COM](http://WWW.TRIJICON.COM)



## 4 HORNADY RAPID® SAFE READY VAULT

Hornady Security® RAPiD® Safes offer quick, dependable access to your firearm while providing security from unauthorized users using patented RFID technology, which unlocks the safe faster than keypads and biometrics, and four included RFID tags can be selectively programmed to open this safe and any other RAPiD Safe you own. Dual-purpose gun racks accommodate up to six long guns and 14 handguns. PVC coating protects firearms, while deep standoff provides room for large optics, and square peg hooks allow placement anywhere inside the safe. Heavy-duty steel housing and five hardened locking lugs provide protection of valuables, plus pre-drilled mounting holes allow additional security. A digital keypad and backup mechanical key offer additional entry methods, and AC and battery power ensure firearms are protected and ready to go 24/7. MSRP: \$831.67

INFO: [WWW.HORNADY.COM](http://WWW.HORNADY.COM)



## 5 BARNETT BLACKCAT RECURVE CROSSBOW

Barnett has revived its recurve crossbow line with the all-new Blackcat, which is designed to be a straightforward, easy-to-use hunting option. The Blackcat has a safety on its side, with anti-dry fire trigger and finger safety reminders to start newcomers off on the right foot. The crossbow comes with a red-dot sight, aluminum arrows and lightweight quiver. Other features include a Soft-Lok™ Floating Bristle arrow retainer, anti-vibration foot stirrup, pass-through foregrip and three picatinny rails for optics. Draw weight: 195 pounds. Kinetic energy: 57 foot-pounds. Speed: 260 feet per second. MSRP: \$169.99

INFO: [WWW.BARNETTCROSSBOWS.COM](http://WWW.BARNETTCROSSBOWS.COM)





## 6 MILLENNIUM TREESTANDS Q200 BUCK HUT SHOOTING HOUSE

Millennium's new Buck Hut is constructed with a heavy-duty waterproof soft shell with black windows and black interior for ultimate concealment, and a roomy interior with up to 7-foot height for standing shots. Each window has an adjustable height shooting rest for rifles or crossbows, and there is plenty of room for vertical bow shooting, as well. The tower has two adjustable legs for leveling on uneven ground made of heavy-duty, powdercoated steel construction. Weight: 323 pounds. Overall Height: 15', 8". Blind Dimensions: 7'4" W x 4' D x 7' H. Weight capacity: 500 pounds. MSRP: Not yet available. **INFO: MILLENNIUMSTANDS.COM**

## 7 OUTDOOR EDGE BRUSH DEMON

Designed in the spirit of the ancient Greek Kopis short sword, the Brush Demon is a rugged, beast of a chopper for blazing trails and clearing thick brush. The 13.5-inch blade is constructed from tough 65Mn carbon spring-steel with a hand-finished, convex cutting edge and protected with a black powdercoat finish. The rubberized TPR handle ensures an extremely comfortable and secure, nonslip grip for chopping and slicing in all conditions. Comes complete with a quality nylon scabbard with multiple grommets for tying to a pack or MOLLE system. The quick-release belt loop can be modified for both low- and high-ride carry options. Designed by custom knife maker and big-blade expert Jerry Hossom. MSRP: \$69.95 **INFO: WWW.OUTDOOREDGE.COM**

## 8 SCENT CRUSHER OZONE GO

The Scent Crusher Ozone Go is designed to remove odors and contaminants from your vehicle using the power of ozone. The chemical-free ozone destroys most odors in just 30 minutes. Simply plug the unit into your vehicle's 12-volt outlet for hassle-free use. It features an LED Ozone Emittance Light, 30-minute automatic timer with cycle-generated ozone thereafter and two-year maintenance-free warranty. Dimensions: 0.76 x 4.33 x 1.6 inches. MSRP: \$39.99 **INFO: SCENTCRUSHER.COM**

## 9 EASTON BOWTRUK ROLLER BOW CASE

The Easton BowTruk was designed to secure bows, arrows and archery gear. It has two main bow compartments built for full-size compound bows up to 47 inches in length. There are eight interior and exterior accessory pockets with dedicated compartments for stabilizers and arrow storage. The BowTruk has a hybrid hard/soft shell that offers 360-degree protection for equipment during airline handling and transport. It also offers easy toting capabilities with field-replaceable roller bearing wheels. A double seatbelt system securely anchors bows and three internal pockets keep gear organized. Its Cordura outer shell provides a significantly higher abrasion and tear resistance versus standard ballistic nylon and polyester. The case also includes a padded carry handle and shoulder strap. Dimensions: 47" long x 15" wide x 10" high. MSRP: \$419.99 **INFO: WWW.EASTONARCHERY.COM**

## 10 MISSION ARCHERY HAMMR

The all-new Mission Hammr is the perfect solution for growing archers. Its new Fast Fit cam technology offers 1/2-inch draw length adjustments for a wider range of adjustability, and is quicker and easier to adjust than ever before. The Hammr draw length adjusts from 17 to 29 inches to fit virtually all archers. Draw weight automatically increases with every draw length, ranging from 16-70 pounds. The Hammr's cam system also provides an improved back wall for a more consistent anchor point, and delivers efficient speed up to 300 fps. Mission added a dead end string stop to dampen post-shot noise and vibration, and a newly designed grip that is comfortable for a wide range of shooters. With its compact 28-inch axle-to-axle length and mass weight of 3.4 pounds, the Hammr provides excellent handling and maneuverability. MSRP: \$299 **INFO: MISSIONARCHERY.COM**

## 11 SPYPOINT LINK-MICRO-LTE CELLULAR TRAIL CAMERA

The LINK-MICRO-LTE from SPYPOINT continues the legacy of the MICRO family, offering incredible performance and opening the door to the mobile scouting solution, at a price that any hunter can afford. The LINK-MICRO-LTE is a photo-mode only camera, with multi-shot capabilities. All camera settings are managed in the app, where the full compliment of advanced scouting tools like enhanced AI species filters, and mapping and weather integration can be found. Features include 10 megapixel capability, 0.5-second trigger speed, 80-foot detection and flash range, and more. The LINK-MICRO-LTE takes advantage of the LTE cellular network for improved camera reliability and longevity. MSRP: \$149.99 **INFO: WWW.SPYPOINT.COM**

## 12 STEALTH CAM FUSION WIRELESS TRAIL CAMERA

Fusion Wireless Cameras take the guesswork out of cellular activation and will have you transmitting images in a matter of minutes with their quick-scan QR setup. Combined with Stealth Cam's new data plans, Fusion offers affordable options for every budget and need. Available on AT&T, Verizon or a Global cellular network. Camera features include QR Code Scan Set-Up, 26 MP images, 4-Power IR Emitters, 80-foot IR flash range, Security Mode, 0.8-second Reflex™ Trigger Matrix™, Advanced Blur Reduction, Retina™ Low Light sensitivity, and many more options. Monthly cellular plans range from \$4 to \$50, depending on options. MSRP: \$199.99-\$249.99 **INFO: WWW.STEALTHCAM.COM**







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# Food Plot Soil

## Why Are We So Focused On pH?

### Soil pH - A Calcium Need Not Lime

Why are we SO OBSESSED with soil pH? Is it the fact that it is indeed that important of a factor, or simply the start of any good food plot article? When you start researching, pH is simply a reading of soil health, one part of a true soil test, not the end all be all factor! The best way to explain this overly educated focal point of food plots in layman terms is that using only soil pH to determine soil health is equal to a doctor only using a thermometer readout to treat heart disease...it doesn't make much sense, unless it's just one step the overall diagnosis.

For most food plotters, a pH of 6-7 is great for plant growth. This slightly acidic soil means most minerals and nutrients are "more" soluble or available for plants to use...the reason most soils become acidic or are acidic after years of neglect is due to rain leaching ions like calcium and magnesium, or organic matter breaking down and creating weak acids. If you get a reading of 6-7, its best to move on or you will likely get a recommendation to simply apply 1 or 2 tons of lime. This is where most food plotters could use a new pair of glasses, to look at the bigger picture.

### Liming Food Plots

A soil pH readout and liming recommendation can often lead to limited food plot success the task of liming a plot can take valuable time away from the other needs of a plot, such as soil prep, fertilizing, or even focusing on weeds. We focus on soil pH because soil pH once adjusted can essentially release minerals and nutrients into the soil. However because lime, can be hard to apply with limited equipment, hard to get to the plot, or the fact that it takes one to two years to work absorbs a great deal effort...leaving the other notable factors of food plot success behind. These other key elements of food plot success can for the most part make or break a plot, such as a key nitrogen applications for brassicas during the right stages of growth or eliminating grass competition from clover. This is not to mention spending more time on hunting strategy, access, trail cameras, or other hunting strategies associated with a food plot. The solution of lime, comes with many problems, all a great deal more than what a typical food plotter is willing or can handle. So to review lime:

- Takes 1 to 2 years to adjust pH
- Can be hard to purchase
- Is hard to apply or move to limited access food plots

### Changing pH With Calcium Instead

From the world of BIG AG, where soil health is everything, comes a genius solution for the everyday food plotter...changing soil pH with a spray. This spray magnifies the true power behind lime...calcium. Calcium is what is desired from a lime application, that is, an ION that can actually move the needle on acidity in soil. By adding this calcium, you increase the pH, release nutrients, and improve water penetration within the soil, just like with lime, but in a much shorter time frame. This is not just liquid lime, but an entirely different source of calcium...DeerGro's PlotStart®.

PlotStart® is a liquid calcium spray derived from a proprietary recipe of complexed carbohydrates, calcium chloride, and produces a highly chelated solution that can adjust pH at a surprising rate. Immediately after application PlotStart can notably change soil pH in as little as 3-6 months. In fact the guaranteed 10% calcium spray has the potential to change soil pH at a equivalency of 2.5 gallons to 1 ton of lime! Besides changing soil pH, the increase in calcium immediately helps plant growth and health with prominent increases in yield.

### Changing pH With A Sprayer

PlotStart® solves several problems with lime, and overall food plot soil preparation, which stands for why it was brought from big Ag to food plotters in recent years. Now a food plotter can manage soil health and soil pH with a sprayer not thousands of lbs. of lime. No equipment? NO PROBLEM...By not only confronting soil pH, but soil and plant health and the limitations lime placed on food plotters, DeerGro's PlotStart® can allow food plotters to plant exceptionally successful food plots on a limited budget, and with limited equipment. With just a 4 gallon backpack sprayer, or sprayer on a four wheeler, you can tackle installing and maintaining a food plot.

To review PlotStart®:

- Immediately adjusts pH
- 2.5 gallons = 1 ton of lime
- Can be applied with a sprayer

This year look at tackling your Plot with DeerGro's PlotStart®, and focus your time on where it really matters...the food plot strategy, not just liming it. Go to [DEERGRO.COM](http://DEERGRO.COM) to shop now, and checkout the other game changing product for food plotters....DeerGro's PlotBoost®







# FALL FOOD PLOTS FOR BETTER DEER HUNTING





BROUGHT TO YOU BY:

  
**Antler King®**  
BIGGER BUCKS – HEALTHIER DEER

**W**hen planned and prepared effectively food plots can provide incredible drawing power. Unfortunately, the majority aren't effective. They are often slapped into the easiest locations, with little thought invested into how they can maximize hunting opportunities. To get killer results from food plots, one must do more than the minimum. This special Antler King section will explain how to get the most out of your fall food plots — and improve your hunting prospects.

CHARLES ALSHEIMER



# CEREAL RYE: NATURE'S BEST SOIL BUILDER AND DEER FEED

I should have known better and been frustrated by the results. Truth be told, I did know better. The ground targeted for a 1-acre alfalfa patch hadn't been previously broken. Going from an overgrown meadow to alfalfa is a really big lift, particularly in an area that does not offer good soils. I knew better, but the owner asked that I try my best. So, I did.

By late summer, it was painfully obvious that the alfalfa plot wasn't happening. In fact, I was mildly surprised that I had close to 10% of a stand growing, especially with the weather being so uncooperative that year.

Luckily, I had a plan, which greatly reduced the frustration factor. On Sept. 1, the alfalfa plot was turned under and cereal rye hit the dirt. Jump to mid-November and I honestly lost count of how many different bucks I saw exit the nearby standing corn and enter the three parts Antler King Fall-Winter-Spring, and one part Antler King Lights Out Forage Oats plot. The reason that the owner had wanted alfalfa was because he believed it could draw the deer out of the sea of corn and beans in the area to feed on the alfalfa. All along, I knew if the alfalfa failed, cereal rye would do the trick, and it did.

About an hour before dark one evening, the buck I was after travelled through the corn, popped into the woods and walked into the cereal rye, at about 12 paces from

me, when my SEVR-tipped bolt vanished into his boiler room.

If there was only one crop that I could ever plant again for deer, narrowing it down to the top two would be instantaneous. There's no question in my mind that it comes down to clover and cereal rye. The cereal rye — specifically Antler King's Fall-Winter-Spring — would win after a few moments of analysis. It truly is nature's soil builder and all-around deer food. Here's why.

## IT STARTS IN THE SOIL

When it comes to thriving food plots, the soil is the foundation upon which they are built. In the most simple terms, plants can thrive in good, healthy soils, yet never reach their growth and nutritional potentials in poor-quality soils. You want healthy plants? The soil must provide them with their needs or you will be using a lot of foliar fertilizers that are sprayed directly on the plants. If the plants don't get what they need they simply can't produce, and improving the soil is almost

always the most effective way of providing those necessities. Out of all of the plantings available, cereal rye is the one that I use that benefits the soil the most.

It all happens because cereal rye is a very effective builder of OM (organic matter) in the soil. OM is plant and animal residue that breaks down in the soil to form humus. In turn, humus is organic material that has been converted by microorganisms to a resistant state of decomposition. Once in its stable state, those materials are done breaking down and are viewed as OM.

According to The Noble Research Institute, "Organic matter is a reservoir of nutrients that can be released to the soil. Each percent of organic matter in the soil releases 20 to 30 pounds of nitrogen, 4.5 to 6.6 pounds of P<sub>2</sub>O<sub>5</sub> and 2 to 3 pounds of sulfur per year. The nutrient release occurs predominantly in the spring and summer, so summer crops benefit more from organic-matter mineralization than winter crops."

At the same time, OM acts like



the soil's sponge. We all know that traditional food plots need water to grow. In fact, rain and the lack of it probably causes farmers and food plotters more stress than any other factor.

Generally speaking, the higher the OM levels in the soil, the more precipitation is absorbed into the soils and the less runs off. That moisture is then stored in the soil comparatively longer the higher the OM levels are. At the same time, OM is improving soil structure, which also enables the soil to take up and hold more water, as well.

Finally, higher OM levels help reduce erosion. Again, from The Noble Research Institute, "This property of organic matter is not widely known. Data used in the universal soil loss equation indicate that increasing soil organic matter from 1 to 3 percent can reduce erosion 20 to 33 percent because of increased water infiltration and stable soil aggregate formation caused by organic matter."

The reason that cereal rye is such a powerful OM builder is because of its robust dicotyledonous root system, with a very deep tap root and a vast network of smaller offshoots, with the root system looking much like an upside-down Christmas tree, minus the decorations. Its ability to dig very deep is the key behind cereal rye going dormant when temperatures are below freezing, then to immediately spring to life during a thaw. It also is why cereal rye is able to mine nitrogen and potassium from deep in the soil, bringing it close enough to the surface for future plantings of shallow-rooted plants to benefit from.

Add it all up and if there is another planting that draws deer like crazy that can touch cereal rye's abilities to improve the soils, I don't know what it is.

### FEEDING DEER

As impressive as cereal rye is at building soils, it's equally impressive as a deer feeder.

Planted in late summer or early fall, it offers a pretty darn stable 15% protein until it starts kicking into grain production, the following summer. That's not bad at all.

Better still, it's how cold-friendly cereal rye is that really nudges it over the line. That same, deep and comparatively expansive root system that is so fantastic at building OM, also allows the plants to merely go dormant when the temperatures dip below freezing. When the temps rise and the soil thaws, the plants kick right back to growth mode, until mature.

The importance of that can't be stressed enough on quite a few levels. For those that experience intermittent winter thaws, you can often get new growth spurts while almost all of the other plant life is still dormant.

For as great as that can be during the winter, it's really in the spring when cereal rye's ability to jump to life can be worth its weight in deer-saving gold. That late winter, early spring period also happens to be when bucks and does need highly digestible protein the most, due to growing antlers and fawns.

Those of us that live in areas experiencing legitimate winters tend to stress how hard the winters are on deer, and for good reason. Whitetails in regions that deal with truly tough winters typically run negative energy balances all winter long. That means it takes them more calories to live than they are able to derive from their comparatively poor-quality winter food sources.

Here's the rub, though. For as hard as winter can be on deer, it's very often the period between thaws and eventual spring green up that can be the true kiss of death to struggling whitetails. Those two- to four-week periods between snow melt and spring green up are great for us not having to walk through snow, but sticks, buds and dead grasses and weeds are still negative energy balance foods for deer. That delay before spring

green up is the final straw for a lot of "winter-killed" deer.

Cereal rye plantings nearly eliminate that stretch. Rather than talking weeks to more than a month before kicking back to life, cereal rye is talking days. The ability to have a 15% protein, easily digestible food source within days of the thaw, as opposed to weeks or more, can be a really big deal, in addition to all of those feeding windows during winter thaws. Cereal rye can be a deer's best friend when it experiences a tough winter.

An added bonus, as revealed by the parade of deer that I saw on my opening hunt, as well as countless others hunting over cereal rye, deer don't wait until winter to start feeding heavily on it. Although I've seen deer feed on it from its emergence on, I'd really consider it to be a prime midseason draw for deer feeding.

Deer like greens for a bunch of different reasons. One of which is that a diversity of food helps their stomach biology break down other foods, as well. I very easily could be wrong about this, but I suspect that's why cereal rye really starts getting hot as other greens mature and die. Whether my speculation around the motive is correct or not, by mid-October, I expect the cereal rye plots to start heating up, sooner if one travels north, a bit later as one goes south.

From then on, I expect cereal rye to draw as well as corn, beans, brassicas or just about any other prime food plot plantings. Sure, one day they'll want beans more than anything else, another day corn or brassicas, but cereal rye will hold it's own with all of them. As a bonus, when over-browsed it merely grows more, unlike those other popular plantings.

### BEST USES

For as much as I love cereal rye, I next to never plant it alone. To start with, I am always mixing three parts Antler King Fall-





*The buck that the author was after was around the 12th one that he watched leave the corn to visit the cereal rye.*

DANIEL SCHMIDT

Winter-Spring, and one part Antler King Lights Out Forage Oats. I do that because the oats are a slightly better early-season draw. To get the maximum from the soil building and weed control, I go with a heavy seed rate. When planting as a stand-alone crop, I'll go 150-200 pounds per acre of the 3:1 mix of Antler King Fall-Winter-Spring and Antler King Lights Out Forage Oats.

Due to how ridiculously easy cereal rye is to grow, along with its tremendous soil-building qualities, it's almost always my planting of choice for the first two to four years of a new plot's life. When transforming meadows, CRP fields

and other previously unbroken ground, including clearing plots in the woods, planting cereal rye the first few years helps build the soils to the point where more delicate crops can then follow.

Planting at the higher rate also helps take advantage of cereal rye's abilities to allelopathically suppress weed growth by releasing its own form of herbicide. At the same time, the cereal rye offers the impressive ability to create physical barriers that the weeds can't get through. Added up, and it's a fantastic choice for new plots with seedbanks of weeds and grasses that are just waiting to take over the plot.

The other major use that I have for the 3:1 mix of Antler King Fall-Winter-Spring and Lights Out Forage Oats is top seeding into other plantings, specifically corn, soybeans and brassicas. For the corn and beans, as they start to turn colors, I'll walk down the rows with a hand seeder, tossing about 100 pounds per acre of the 3:1 mix on top of the dirt.

For the brassicas, I wait until they grow 4 to 6 inches tall and top seed at the same rate into them. So, because cereal rye germinates so easily, I can consistently, successfully get away with merely throwing the seeds on top of the dirt into those annual plantings. With that being said, it's always a good idea to top seed before a day long soaking rain shower.

The beauty of this method is multifaceted. We are getting both the soil-building and weed-control benefits of the cereal rye. At the same time, we're jacking up the tonnages of food production from the plot, and as our initial planting is consumed by deer, the cereal rye fills in the gaps, continuing to feed them. Finally, it adds a diverse food offering to the plot.

## CONCLUSION

If I had to choose just one planting for food plots, it would be cereal rye. When you add together its abilities to draw in deer, feed them during their most critical time periods and do wonders for the soil, what more could you truly want? It even works great to let it grow all of the following summer, then spray it in fall, top seed more of the mix into the old plot and drag last year's cereal rye down flat. Do that and you can cut way down on seed, as last year's crop will germinate as well.

— Steve Bartylla is host of *Grow 'em Big TV* on Pursuit Channel.





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## Why you should plant Antler King®!

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Antler King's proprietary seed coating increases seed "livability" by a whopping 50% (and that means more food for your deer)!

### 4. Less seed-to-soil contact needed

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### 5. Deeper roots

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### 6. More pH tolerant

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Helps your bucks recover after the rut

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### Honey Hole 5 varieties of turnips, rape

- Extremely easy to grow
- Extreme tonnage (thanks to Ultra Coat Orange)
- Grows really fast
- Plants 1/2 acre for just \$20



Annual

### Slam Dunk Radish blend (all season)

- Winter peas, buckwheat (early)
- Radishes, forage rape (late)
- Grows fast, matures in 60-90 days
- Soil, pH, shade tolerant



Annual

### No Sweat Minimum till blend

- Can plant in the fall and still get a good hunt plot
- Fast and easy to grow
- Rape, forage oats, annual and perennial rye, clover mix
- pH, soil tolerant



Perennial/Annual

### Fall/Winter/Spring Cereal rye and winter peas

- Special variety of Antler King® tested cereal rye
- Grows extremely fast, attracts deer right away
- pH and drought tolerant
- Cereal rye grows grain for spring



Annual

### Lights Out Forage Oats with rape, turnips

- Forage Oats and rape (early)
- Turnips in late season
- Canadian seeds stay green into winter months
- Long lasting, easy to grow



Annual

### Small Town Throwdown All-season blend

- Clover, chicory, buckwheat (early)
- Kale, rape, rye (late)
- Good tonnage from Oct. 1 all the way through January
- Easy to grow



Perennial/Annual



BIGGER BUCKS – HEALTHIER DEER





# THE 5 TOP DEER PLOTS

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BIGGER BUCKS – HEALTHIER DEER





**AFTER DECADES OF EXPERIENCE IMPROVING AND MANAGING WHITETAIL HABITAT AROUND THE COUNTRY, THE AUTHOR HAS LEARNED A THING OR TWO ABOUT SUCCESSFUL FOOD PLOTS.**

**T**he most eye-opening learning experiences that I had in my early years were when I started branching out from my home state of Wisconsin. Falling on my face a few times while trying to improve and manage new deer hunting properties taught me very swiftly that few things work everywhere. Deer all have their own personalities, the habitat changes from fence line to fence line and the specifics of each area are quite different. Combine that all and I've found it a bit risky to make blanket statements about whitetails, habitat and even the best habitat improvements. Too often, what's best for one is an utter disaster for another.

CHARLES ALSHEIMER





*After frost seeding clover into cereal rye, the author leaves the plot alone until the following late August, a few weeks after this photo, when he mows it for the first time that summer.*

That applies to food plot plantings to a great extent, as well. Go to the northwoods of Minnesota, the Upper Peninsula of Michigan or any other large, exclusively wooded area. The same plantings that are ignored in the farm belt can be true deer magnets in the big woods, simple due to a lack of better options.

Go to the dry, sand country of the Southwest and try growing clover in the desert-like conditions without irrigation. It really doesn't matter that the deer would love it — if it simply won't grow.

There are a whole bunch of factors that play into these types of things. Still, the longer that I focus on habitat improvements, I keep coming back to the same five crops that find their way into my various food plots. No, I don't have any great solutions for the desert, but these will do well for almost everyone else, as they are easily my top five deer plantings.

### CEREAL RYE

Cereal rye is such a backbone of my food-plotting methods that I recently wrote an entire article on it. If you're not well versed on the benefits of cereal rye, I strongly recommend reading that piece carefully. Cereal rye truly is a food plot and deer-feeding workhorse.

The highlights are that it does extremely well at building the health of the soils, while being very easy to grow, offering superior weed control properties and it merely goes dormant during freezing temperatures. The dormancy is important since not only is cereal rye a powerful draw during deer season, it also is during any portion of winter that snow depths allow deer to paw through the snow to the feed. At the same time, any temperature thaws result in a near instant snap back to growth mode. This 15% protein source that's highly digestible two to four weeks before spring green up can be a tremendous aid to

whitetail survival and health, as well as a big antler builder.

Rather than go any deeper on the subject, please read the entire article. Basically, cereal rye is a tremendously productive planting for both deer and soil health.

### CLOVER

My second choice really depends on one's latitude and the severity of the region's winters. If it's in Wisconsin and points north, clover would actually drop to my third choice. With that being said, for Iowa, Illinois, Indiana and states experiencing similar winters, clover is a solid #2. Due to their comparatively mild winters, clover is a year-round food source in such states.

A really nice thing about clover is that it's easy and low maintenance to grow. You'll notice that in all but two of these seed types, I am not mentioning product names. With that being said, in both the clover and brassica sections, I feel



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that I have to. While working as a Sunflower Breeder's Research Assistant for a large seed company for three years while in college, I learned fast that there are all sorts of different types of sunflowers. There are the general varieties,

such as dwarfs, multi-headed and the standard, tall sunflower, but you can breed strains of each for virtually any trait imaginable.

I explain this because many food plotters realize that deer tend to prefer white clover. The catch is

that every white clover available has been bred for varying traits. Some are more desirable to deer than others and their hardiness will vary wildly.

For that reason, I feel the need to point out that when I'm talking about clover, I'm specifically referring to Antler King's Trophy Clover. I have conducted many field trials with this seed, as closely as I could to those that I conducted for the seed company in college. Antler King's Trophy Clover, as well as their Honey Hole brassica mix, consistently come out on top for the criteria that I value the most. So, when discussing clover and brassicas, those are the specific seed blends that I'm referring to. This is important to note, as results with others may vary.

With that in mind, here is how I consistently get more than seven years of production out of my clover plots.

It all begins with soil testing and properly amending the soil for clover. I usually plant cereal rye the fall before in the selected plot. Doing so enables me to return in late February or March to frost seed clover into last year's annual crop. When doing so, I seed at 125% the suggested rate and the cereal rye serves as its cover crop. Its ability to allelopathically control weed competition helps combat grasses and broadleaf weeds, but doesn't impact the clover.

I let that grow until late summer, when I mow the crop for the first time. After that, I merely frost seed each late winter, now at 50% of the suggested rate, spray a grass-only killer once in late spring/early summer, then mow several weeks later and once again in late summer, and apply fertilizer every second year. I continue repeating that cycle until I swap the plot out for something else or when too many weeds start taking over.

When one considers its highly digestible protein levels, the raw tonnage of forage it produces, its comparatively low cost and

## HELPFUL HINTS FOR PLANTING IN THE FALL

Planting food plots for wildlife is the single-most effective way to attract, hold and grow deer on your property, and providing food on a year-round basis is critical. One of the most common times to plant food plots is in the late summer or fall of the year. This is a great time to plant for a variety of reasons: less weeds for your plots to compete with, allows fall plots to mature at the perfect time for hunting, predictable weather patterns, etc.

In the Northern U.S., typically the best time to plant a fall food plot (Honey Hole, Slam Dunk, Lights Out, Fall/Winter/Spring, Trophy Clover or No Sweat) would be during the months of July, August and the first half of September. In the middle U.S. and South, the best times to plant are August, September and October. This ensures that the plants can become established and achieve their full potential before a killing frost. Trophy Clover, Red Zone and No Sweat are often planted in the spring as well, but can also be very successful if planted in the summer or early fall and provide excellent fall nutrition sources and hunting plots.

A couple of things to keep in mind when planting in the fall:

### LIMING

- Test your soil's pH and take the proper steps to neutralize your soil to create an optimum growing environment.
- Spreading the necessary amount of lime prior to tilling will not only benefit your fall food plot, but it is also very beneficial to your spring plot as well.
- Raising your pH is not an overnight process; lime takes a variant amount of time to break down and react in the soil.
- The amount of time depends on how much rain you receive and the type of lime you use.
- Pelletized lime will break down faster, but you will have to lime more often.
- Pulverized aglime takes longer to break down but lasts much longer (six to 10 years).

### PLANTING

- It is usually pretty dry during this

time; keep an eye on the weather and try to time planting right before a rain.

• If you plan to hunt over this food plot, be sure you are planting food sources that are coveted by deer during the time you will hunt it. In the early season, deer will seek high protein sources such as these Antler King forages:

- Red Zone
- Trophy Clover
- Mini Max
- No Sweat

As the weather turns colder, deer will seek higher energy sources like Honey Hole, Slam Dunk, Lights Out and Fall/Winter/Spring.

• It is best to lightly cover seeds in case it does not rain immediately after planting, as the soil will protect the seeds from the heat of the summer sun, and they will wait to germinate until it rains.

• Test your pH and take the proper steps to neutralize your soil to create an optimum growing environment.

• A great way to help your plants survive a dry spell is to spray Antler King® Plot Max. It raises the pH, creates organic matter and unlocks nutrients in the soil. It will also help your soil retain more moisture and ease stress on your plants.

### ROUNDUP

- If you are NOT planning on putting in a fall food plot but have an area picked out for next season (spring or fall), it would be beneficial to spray with Roundup this fall.
- This will kill all of the plants and allow these plants to break down into usable organic material over the winter.
- Next spring, your soil will be easier to till and much more fertile!

Good luck this fall and happy planting!

– Todd Stittleburg, Founder, Antler King



maintenance, as well as its year-round ability as a food source, and even its eight to nine month production in the harsh winter regions, clover is a heck of a good choice.

### BRASSICAS

The differences in varieties are significant in the brassica family of plants, as well. This large family of plants has the reputation as being a great late-season option, as frosts bring the sugars up from the roots of many of its members. When that occurs, the deer can go from ignoring them, to wiping out brassicas in the time that it takes for a hard frost to hit.

But, for as good as brassicas can be as a late-season option, the

right mix of strains can result in season-long drawing power for a brassica plot.

This was made painfully obvious to me than when managing ground in southeast Minnesota. Within a half-mile of a 2-acre food plot location, deer could find corn, beans, alfalfa, clover, acorns and a surplus of apples, just to name the bigger draws. Still, the 2 acres of Antler King's Honey Hole that I planted was completely wiped out by before the first week in October. With the germination and growth rates being optimal, I was shocked.

When troubleshooting the situation with the owner, he suggested the brand that he'd always used, as the deer didn't

touch them until after a couple of frosts. When I planted 1/2 acre in that same location the following year, the plot wasn't touched before November and lasted beyond the end of the season.

The reason for that stark difference was merely the specific brassica strains used. Most brassica mixes contain varieties that peak in desirability after frosts, whereas Antler King's Honey hole was specifically designed to offer highly attractive early-, mid- and late-season varieties.

Honey Hole also tests extremely well all winter long. As Todd Stittleburg, founder and developer of Antler King Products for the last 30 years recently told



*To get maximum growth from most members of the brassica family, including volleyball-size turnips, the plants need plenty of elbow room – and going heavy on the nitrogen fertilizer is a good idea, too.*

ANTLER KING





*As you can see in the date on this photo, brassicas can be a good early-season draw, assuming the mix contains desirable, early-season varieties.*

me, “I sent random samples of Honey Hole that I collected from a farm in Wisconsin in February to be tested. If you can offer added energy and protein in January it is important, but it is critical in February. If we can turn deer on to a food source with energy close to and with protein three times higher than corn, that’s a really big and helpful deal! That can make a big difference in animal health, survival, reproduction and rack sizes — and we have just that with Honey Hole.”

In fact, it tested at 25.4% protein, in February, well after the plants fully matured.

To get added production in brassica plots, once they reach 4 to 8 inches high, I top seed about 100 pounds per acre with a mix of three parts cereal rye and one part oats into the brassica plot. Since those seeds will just be spread on top of the dirt, timing this before an all-day soaking rain is best.

By letting the brassicas germinate first, they have a head start on growth, allowing them to

stay ahead of the mix. That is, until the deer start hammering the brassicas. Then, as the brassicas are browsed down, the mix of rye and oats continues feeding the deer.

Finally, although I’ll go higher than the suggested seed rate on most all other plantings, I won’t on brassicas. The brassica family has a high tendency for preferring elbow room. If you want to grow big brassicas they need space. It’s the one seed blend that I’d rather plant light than heavy, as production really suffers when planted too thick.

## CORN AND SOYBEANS

Frankly, I use as little corn and soybeans as I can get away with each year. As often as not, I’m buying corn and beans back from farm renters at their input costs. Depending on the quality of the crop produced, the input costs per acre of corn range from \$300 to \$450 an acre. For soybeans they run from \$150 to \$300 per acre.

That right there is why I plant

and/or buy back as little corn and beans as needed to reach the property owners’ goals. They are expensive crops to plant for deer food plots, considering that I can plant any of the other crops listed in this article at a small fraction of those costs.

With that being said, soybeans are good at feeding deer from a few weeks after emergence until the pods are finally wiped out by deer, hopefully in the middle of, or later in winter. Beans and their greenery offer good nutrition that entire time.

Corn is high in energy, which can be very important to prep for the rut and then survive winter, but otherwise it’s rather low in nutritional benefits. At the same time, corn isn’t nearly as consistent of a deer food source. They’ll feed on the young stalks, but lay off as they mature. Then, they hit the dried corn again.

The biggest reason that I plant corn and soybeans is to allow the deer to feed on both, without the need to leave the property. When



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## A WEED-FREE FALL FOOD PLOT

During my 25+ years of planting food plots, I have found that I enjoy planting food plots just as much as I do hunting over them. That's why I eagerly await getting my fall food plots started each year!

For me, when it comes to planting fall food plots, I do things a little differently than most people in regards to preparing the soil for a weed-free food plot. A few years back I was going crazy during the spring planting season. My food plot program consisted of 75% Antler King Trophy Clover and Chicory food plots, so I never had anything to do during the spring planting season. I couldn't take it anymore, so I started thinking of changes I could make for my fall plantings that would help make them more weed-free and would get me into the plots throughout the spring and summer months, so here is what I came up with, and for me here in central Illinois, it works out great.

1. My groundwork for my fall plots starts in April. During the month of April, my fall plots from the previous year will be all greened up with weeds, so at this time, I will be spraying to kill off my plots (along with Plot Max) and taking soil samples.

2. Two weeks after spraying Roundup and Plot Max, I will lime all my fall food plots and work it in while discing them as deep as I can, which for me is about 8 inches.

3. Around the second week of June, I will go in and spray all my fall plots to kill off all the weeds that have developed from pulling up the weed seeds from previously discing. This is important because any time you disturb the soil you will likely unearth weed seeds that have been lying dormant waiting for their opportunity to grow.

4. During mid-July, I will once again go back in and spray to kill off any new weed growth. (This sounds repetitive I know ...but I DO NOT LIKE WEEDS.)

5. During the first couple weeks of August is when I typically try to plant. At this time, I'm first going to spread fertilizer on all of my fall plots and then lightly disc them no more the 2 inches deep, so I don't pull up any more dormant weed seeds. Now for me, my favorite fall food plot mix is Antler King Honey Hole, and like I have already said, I do things a little differently with most things food plot related; how I cover the seeds is no different. I never drag or cover any of my small seed mixes such as Honey Hole. Instead, I let Mother Nature do it for me with a timely rain shower. But if you prefer to cover it just do it lightly so you don't lose germination from covering them too deep (1/4 inch or less is ideal).

6. If there's anything else I could tell you that may help with your fall food plots it would be to only use the amount of seed that is recommended for the size of your plot and never put your fertilizer on your plots until you plant them. For many of your fall food plot mixes, the recommended fertilizer will call for a high nitrogen level. Weeds thrive on nitrogen, so I only put it down when I'm planting so my plants can get a good start, outgrow the weeds and eventually suffocate out any unwanted plants.

I hope my outside-the-box methods help you better prepare for your fall food plot planting this season or next. And even though it is already early July, this still gives you a month's worth of prep to till and kill and repeat prior to August planting. Thanks again for reading along and happy planting.

— Robie Pruitt, Sales Manager, Antler King





*Clover can truly be the land manager's workhorse, because it supplies high volumes of very nutritious foods.*

ANTLER KING

a property has a lot of acres of food plots to use, that's when I'm adding corn and beans.

When planting the beans or corn specifically for deer, my first step is to try to score free seeds. Various wildlife organizations often give them away. Another option is to become friends with the local seed co-ops. They can't or won't sell seed produced the year before. Get to be good enough friends with them and one can get lucky and have them save those seeds for you.

When the seeds are free or cost very little, it becomes much easier to do what I'm about to suggest. That's to double plant corn and beans that will be left for the deer. After doing the north/south rows like normal, go back over the same plot with east/west rows. If you put that in a good location for deer, you can pretty much bank

on them thinning out your crop. Double planting allows for smaller acreages to survive heavy deer browsing and still often produce an acceptable crop.

Then, as the cherry on top, top seed the same 3:1 ratio mix of cereal rye and oats right into the standing crops in late summer or early fall. Do that and you just greatly extended the life of and tonnages produced by the plot, while also building soils and offering more of a smorgasbord feeding option.

### CONCLUSION

Just as I mentioned at the beginning of this article, next to nothing in the habitat improvement or hunting worlds will work best for everyone, in every situation. After having personally broken dirt for food plots all over the Midwest and

points north, these are the five plantings that I've found to work best for me, in my specific situations in accomplishing my specific goals. I sure can't promise that you will be as thrilled with all of these plantings as I have been. But, if you aren't happy with your plots' production rates, these are good places to start your search for something that will produce the results you are looking for.

— Steve Bartylla has been a *Deer & Deer Hunting* contributor for more than 25 years. He is cohost of *Deer & Deer Hunting-TV* on Pursuit Channel and host of two top-rated online shows: *Grow 'em Big* and *Hunt 'em Big* at [www.deeranddeerhunting.com](http://www.deeranddeerhunting.com).





BY STEVE BARTYLLA

## LET THE KIDS HAVE FUN

HERE ARE A FEW TIPS TO GET THE YOUNGSTERS EXCITED ABOUT HUNTING.

As is always the case, today's column is nothing more than what I've found has worked best for me over the years. If you have different methods that are producing the results that you're happy with, don't let a word I'm about to write change a single thing, and please apply that to everything that I write and say.

Today, let's talk about making kids' hunts fun for all involved.

### FISHING FOR ANSWERS

Many years ago, I caught a break that helped me understand the challenge that I see facing most people when they take kids hunting. The first question being, does the adult try to find success and have the kids watch, or are they best served living vicariously through the children?

When I was in college, I went fishing a mile downstream of a canoe rental business. After sitting down on the bank below some rapids, I was able to watch 30 or so canoes pass by on the river. The majority of people were young families.

I swiftly realized that half of the families were having a blast and the other half were miserable, mostly with the father screaming at his wife and kids as he tried to fish. Apparently, they kept messing up what I can only assume was his idea of fishing for himself, while the wife and kids watched him.

That right there was the key lesson that literally screamed at me that day. If and when I take kids on those types of trips, I have a choice. I can vicariously live through their happiness, and we'll likely have a blast that we talk about for years to come — or I can try to focus on fishing and having the fun myself,



*Enclosed blinds are game-changers for hunting with kids because they allow more movement and noise without spooking deer, increasing every hunt's fun factor and your sanity.*

STEVE BARTYLLA

all but guaranteeing that we'll all be miserable, and the only time it's mentioned in the future is to complain about what a jerk I was.

### RANDOM THOUGHTS

With that in mind, here are some more tips that I've found helpful:

It's all about them. When they want to go, I explain calmly the situation and then leave it all up to the kids.

There's a reason that girls can't do this type of stuff and it's an embarrassing one: parents and role models telling their little girls, directly and indirectly, that they can't. After helping to raise three boys and two girls, my oldest daughter is the hunter. It's beyond ridiculous to believe that girls aren't every bit as capable as boys.

Cram hunting down their throats and they'll likely hate it as much as my friends hated other sports when their parents crammed those sports down their throats. Encouragement is good, but forcing it generally produces bad results.

Hunt elevated and ground blinds whenever possible, with your top halves clothed in black and the back of the blind blacked out as much as practically possible. Do that and you can get away with tons of movement. Speaking of which, bringing along a video game isn't a horrible idea. The same applies to quiet treats that the kids like, really anything to give them something to look forward to.

Be honest with them about all of this stuff. Yes, we certainly must teach them how to be ethical hunters, as

that's our responsibility, but I believe it's a mistake not to proactively share that things don't always go right.

Make the trips short. Odds are higher that a kid will have fun sitting in a blind for one or two hours compared to eight to 12 hours.

Finally, if they want to try to call, rattle, whatever, I'd strongly recommend letting them. Truth be told, I'm pretty sure my oldest daughter is so into this stuff because I let her call turkeys with me when she was 5 or 6. Every time that I called, she struggled to stifle a giggle. Like an idiot, I nicely shushed her each time, calmly warning that if she kept it up that we wouldn't get a turkey. Luckily, that fishing trip popped into my mind and I asked her if she'd like to try. For the next however long, the sounds of seriously troubled, mentally deranged and no doubt dying turkey calls filled the woods, and our sides have never hurt as much from laughing to this day. Remember — it's all about them — if getting them interested and involved is the goal.

### CONCLUSION

No doubt there are other effective methods of achieving the same results. These are just some tricks that I've learned, some the easy way, too many the hard way. A smart person learns from their mistakes, but it's a truly intelligent person that learns from others' mistakes and avoids them all together.





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Despite the high temperature, thoughts of whitetail hunting come to mind. Where, for example, would be the best place to have a deer stand in that area of trees and fields and rolling hills that I have just described? Would it be best to place a stand at the edge of that very narrow field with a pond situated near the woodland? Would it be better located in the center of that largest patch of woods where a stand of white oaks is growing? I tell myself the decision of stand placement doesn't have to be made when the temperature is in the 90s, but it's one of those dilemmas that provides constant bewilderment to a bona fide whitetail hunter and therefore must always be of some consideration.

### NO SUCH THING AS AN OFF SEASON

We deer hunters don't really have an off season. Even during the hot summer months, wherever two or three of us are gathered, we sit and talk about whitetails. In our hunting group, conversation ranges from authentic deer talk to the understanding that it's that time of year when maybe more than a little bragging might take place as to which one in the group is the best shot. And it's not outside the realm of possibility for one in the group, Conrad, to present an old target from the gun range with three shots dead center of the bull's-eye.

Conrad's veracity must be questioned on three fronts. First of all, he has been known to punch holes in a paper target with a screwdriver. Secondly, he has never had an explanation as to why he missed a deer standing broadside some 50 yards in front of his deer stand one day last season. Thirdly, and it hurts me to say it, but Conrad is a known prevaricator who has often taken license with the truth regarding whitetail lore.

Conrad's doctored target aside, a lot of serious conversation does take place regarding gun makers and calibers and ammo. There are proponents of the .30-06, the .270 and the esteemed .30-30 as well as others. It would probably be easier to break into Fort Knox than to get agreement on the best caliber. And there is always a good-natured

argument about whether staying in the stand all day or going out for lunch and then coming back in the afternoon is the proper course of action. Oddly enough, the one thing that's never discussed is proper hunting attire. It seems that frozen fingers and frozen toes are of little consequence when the temperature is in the 90s.

### DEER SEASON DIFFICULTIES

In spite of earlier indecision, when the long awaited season finally arrives, everyone will have chosen their preference, some based on personal scouting, some based on the scouting reports of others and some will go to the same place they've hunted for the last quarter century, deer and scouting reports be hanged. No matter the selection we make, this is an enjoyable part of whitetail hunting. It's the fun of playing a guessing game with our quarry, ourselves and our deer hunting companions as to where, or if, a whitetail might show.

Someone mentioned how simply getting to and from your stand can provide its own type of hunting experience. Beyond a doubt, getting to the stand in the dark can often be either a humorous or an exasperating challenge depending on your mindset. Flashlight in hand, we make our way through the woods before the first warming rays of sunlight crest the wooded ridges, all the while doing our best to be quiet. Often, a multitude of obstacles lie in wait. First of all, no matter how hard I try to avoid it, there is always one leaf-covered limb which, when I step on it, breaks with such a loud noise that one might think I'm cutting timber instead of deer hunting.

Then there are those critters that hustle away through the leaves. They are always just out of range of the flashlight beam, and you are left to wonder: Was it a fox, a skunk, a portly possum or a bobcat? Don't misunderstand, I'm not worried that Bigfoot is going to haul me away to his lair, but if you've ever been standing under a tree when a screech owl announces its presence from a limb directly above your head, then you can understand why someone might be a bit jumpy. With a bit of

luck, those woodland mysteries will always be there, and they're an integral part of the fun.

Someone brought out a journal which contained some of the fond memories from previous hunts. Reminiscing was great, but then it was brought to mind that some fond memories take longer to become fond if you understand what I'm saying. On more than one occasion, I've seen big bucks cross the road in front of me while I'm still in the truck driving to my hunting ground, their antlers glistening in the headlights.

The last time this happened to me, a whitetail crossed the road and went directly into the area I intended to hunt. I was positive I knew where he would bed down, so once daylight arrived, I proceeded directly to that locality. The plot of land was fairly small, bordered by a creek and sprinkled about with a few small loblolly pines in addition to a fair amount of waist-high broom sedge. I tramped every inch of that plot of land, but there was no sign that a whitetail had ever even considered stopping off there. Score one for the whitetail!

### THE WHY

Here is a truth I have learned. There will be days that are too hot. There will be three-layer insulation days. There will be days when the only glimpse of *Odocoileus virginianus* will be on the drive to your hunting grounds, and there will be days when a deer won't even be in the same county where you are hunting. The only critters you will have been close to are those that scurried away as you walked through the woods with your flashlight, and for that we should be thankful.

A lot of preparation goes into making a deer hunt successful, and many of those different segments are out of our control. As I look back, however, at the good times that have been had with family and friends, there is another very important truth I have learned: This Is Why We Do It!

— Marvin Newman is a longtime D&DH contributor from Tennessee.





# THIS IS WHY WE DO IT

THERE ARE MANY UNKNOWNNS WHEN IT COMES TO HUNTING, BUT THE DRIVE TO DOWN A DEER REMAINS CONSTANT – AND IT'S NOT ALWAYS FOR THE REASONS YOU MIGHT THINK.

**A**t the moment, I'm sitting on a cabin porch overlooking the French Broad River and several wooded areas that lie beyond it. The woods give way to fields which give way to more woods which give way to more fields. Some of the fields have small ponds located around their edges. The temperature is in the 90s, and a pair of gray squirrels is playing havoc with the metal roof of the cabin by dropping cuttings from a nearby walnut tree.

(CONTINUED ON PAGE 111)



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